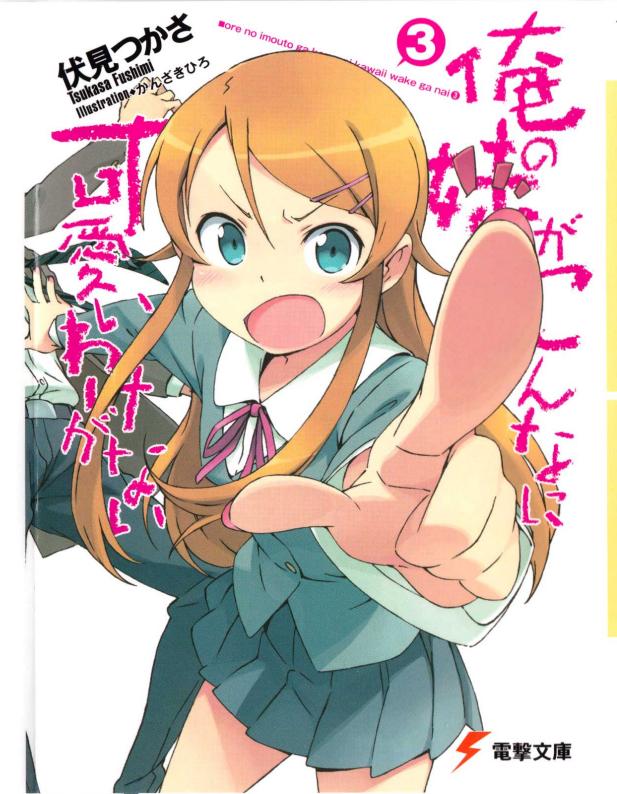
## <sup>おれ いもうと</sup> 俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない③

俺の妹・桐乃が、どうやら創作活動に 目覚めたらしい。ところが、桐乃の書い た小説(ケータイ小説?)とやらは、同 じく同人で小説を書いている黒猫にとっ て理解しがたいものらしく、案の定、口 論になっちまった。その上、何を間違っ たのか、桐乃が好き勝手書いたケータイ 小説がネット上で話題を呼んで、出版社 からオファーが来たっていうんだから、 俺はただただ驚くしかない。

というわけで、何事にも全力な桐乃が 今回発動した"人生相談"によって、俺 は、よりにもよって妹と、クリスマスの 渋谷の街に繰り出す羽目になっちまった ——!? って桐乃! さすがにその場所 は兄妹で入っちゃマズイだろ!!





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伏見つかさ

これが人生最後に出す本かもしれない。そう思いなが ら書き続けていたら、本シリーズも三冊目になりまし た。有り難いことに四冊目も書かせていただけるそう です。このチャンスを活かすべく、背水の陣を敷いて 臨みますので、どうかもう少々お付き合いください。

#### 【電擊文庫作品】

十三番目のアリス

十三番目のアリス②

十三番目のアリス③

十三番目のアリス(4)

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない 俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない②

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない③

### イラスト:かんざきひろ

イラストレーター兼アニメーター。1978年生まれ。本業の 傍ら、海外でレコードをリリースするなど音楽活動もこなす 何でも屋状態の変な緑色の生物。

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# Chapter 1

It was September. Three months had passed since that day when my little sister had asked for that ridiculous life consultation.

And just because I promised to help her, all sorts of things had happened around me over the past few months. Just recalling half of them was enough to make my stomach hurt.

I helped my sister make friends with the same interests as her and I went along with her to an assembly of people with those interests.

I even had to put up quite a fight each time her secret was about to be found out.

Even I felt it wasn't like me to do all that for that hated sister of mine.

But I didn't really have a choice.

I wasn't forced to do it by anyone. Those were simply the things I had wanted to do at the time.

I had spoken with her quite a bit over the past few months.

I had seen quite a bit of a side of her – an honest side – that I had not known existed.

However, none of that had led to a change in our cold relationship.

In fact, it had worsened. I couldn't have told you exactly how, though.

I hated her as always and didn't really care about her.

She showed even more scorn and disgust toward me than before.

And yet she still forced unreasonable demands on me in the name of a "life consultations".

I just couldn't stand it.

That aptly summed up the state I, Kousaka Kyousuke, was in.

When I entered the living room, my little sister was on the phone.

She was in her usual spot: seated deeply in the couch. She was wearing tight jeans and had her legs crossed.

The shirt she wore was so baggy the sleeves hid her hands. That must have been part of the current fashion.

God, no matter what she wears, she looks good in it.

I was a bit annoyed when that thought naturally entered my mind.

That good-looking sister of mine was laughing while happily talking about something over her cell phone.

"Eh? No way! So in the end, she dumped her boyfriend? Hehh. So that's what happened. Ah ha ha. I can't believe it!"

Her hair was dyed light brown, she had earrings in her ears, and her long nails were glossily manicured. Her shapely face was attractive enough without makeup, but she still further improved it with careful use of makeup. She had a mature air to her that belied the fact that she was in middle school.

She was tall but round in all the right places.

That extremely stylish girl was my little sister Kousaka Kirino.

She was a 14 year old middle school girl. She worked as a model for teen magazines, she was an ace of the track-and-field team, and her ranking on tests had her at fifth in the prefecture. She was an utterly amazing person, very unlike her mediocre brother.

However, she had a secret hobby. That secret hobby was so unbelievable that I doubted my sanity when I first learned of it.

What might that be, you ask? ... Well, it's kind of hard for me to say it out loud.

My little sister loved 18+ games, what some call eroge.

She especially loved the ones from the little sister genre and she had a collection of them stowed in a hidden space behind her bookshelf.

She also had children's anime DVD box sets and other such things.

When I was first shown Kirino's collection, I thought my eyes would pop out of my head.

It sounds like a bad joke every time I explain it, but everything I have just explained is the truth.

"Yeah...yeah...Okay, see you tomorrow~," said my sister, ending with a coaxing voice before ending the call.

As someone who knew who she truly was, nothing could have been more sickening.

I wanted to get a drink from the fridge, but the living room was connected with the kitchen and dining room in our house. As such, I would have to pass in front of Kirino to get there. I wanted to have as little to do with her as possible, so I hesitated in the entrance to the living room.

Are you wondering why I would do something like that? ...Sigh...Probably only brothers with extremely unpleasant little sisters could understand how I felt.

Suddenly, my sister's phone started beeping. As soon as she had hung up, she must have received an email.

Middle school girls certainly are a busy bunch. When do they even get a chance to breathe?

"Ugeh," groaned Kirino with a horrible expression upon reading the email.

Accompanied by a number of annoyed tongue clicks, she pressed a few buttons and put the phone up to her ear. She must have called the sender of the email.

"...You and your spiral glasses need to hold on just a second! Are you serious!? How about you just die!? I can't believe you! I told you I didn't want to!"

As usual, she was spewing abuse at a tremendous rate.

(My sister had a public face and a private face that she differentiated between depending on who she was talking to, and I had recently figured out how to determine which "type" of friend she was talking to from her expression and manner of speech.)

From her unrestrained speech and the term "spiral glasses", she must have been speaking with "Saori", one of her private friends.

"...Fine, I get it! You can quit going on about that, I get it already! But in exchange, you need to quit with that disgusting otaku outfit! It's a nuisance being around someone dressed like that!"

While listening to her threatening voice, I resolved myself and snuck past the side of the couch to reach the fridge. I pulled out a can of coffee and brought it to my lips.

"...God, this is bitter."

Kirino hung up just as I was passing back by the front of the couch after finishing off the espresso.

What's with her?

"...Quit being so loud. What has you so mad anyway?" I asked my sister despite the fact that I could have just left well enough alone.

"Hah?"

...Why do you always look at me like that? Yes, I get it, I get it. You're trying to tell me it's none of my business.

"...Tch. It's nothing."

As she looked at me with the same look one would give a pile of garbage, I quickly began my escape.

It may seem pathetic, but that was my punishment for having broken our implicit rule.

Our sibling rule was to just ignore each other unless the other asked for a life consultation.

That rule had only been made a few months prior, but I'm willing to bet any household has similar implicit rules even if the contents are different.

If you want to live with someone else, I'd say it's only natural to set up some guidelines of compromise.

Basically, we had a special version of that.

And then...

"Hey," she said just as I grabbed the doorknob to leave the room. It was almost as if she had timed it.

"...What?"

"C'mere a second."

Kirino was motioning me toward her with her finger while still sitting cross-legged on the couch.

That gesture really pissed me off. That wasn't how she should have been acting toward a brother three years her elder.

"Hurry it up."

"...Fine, fine."

I reluctantly did as my sister insisted. Neither of us made any attempt to hide our irritation with the other.

"What do you want?"

"Hah? What are you going on about? You're the one that asked." Kirino's expression twisted into one of pure scorn. "You want to hear what has me so mad, don't you? Then hurry up and take a seat."

She pointed straight toward the floor. ... This is what I hate. Why does she have to use that tone that seems to say, "I'm giving you a lecture so get down in your place"?

Are you that unwilling to tell me why you're mad? To hell with that!

Dammit, I really need to give her a proper talking to...

I resolutely opened my mouth and said, "I can just sit cross-legged, right?"

Kirino's mouth turned down at the corners and she began to speak.

"Yesterday, I hung out with them again. They invited me, so I didn't really have a choice."

By them she most likely meant her otaku friends, "Saori" and "Kuroneko". Kirino had met them at an offline meeting for a social networking group she was a part of and had been hanging out with them quite often of late.

"Saori" and "Kuroneko" were both screen names.

To give them a simple introduction:

Saori was over 180 cm tall and had the same measurements as Fujiwara Norika. Her fashion sense and manner of speech were otakuism itself. She always used giant spiral glasses to hide her face.

She was very helpful and acted as the leader of the otaku community Kirino was a part of. She and I were indebted to her in many, many ways. She was the one that Kirino had called earlier.

Kuroneko was expressionless, unsociable, and had quite a sharp tongue. This made her quite difficult to get along with and Kirino was constantly getting into arguments with her over anime and games. All of her hair was long and black, including her bangs. Her skin was pure white. She always wore gothic lolita style clothes and had a beauty to her of a different sort than Kirino. According to Kirino, she was a "crazy jakigan<sup>[1]</sup> girl".

Basically, they were both very odd people.

At any rate, it seemed Kirino had met up with those otaku friends at the entrance to the electronics district of Akihabara.

"And that black one didn't show up until five minutes after the time we set."

You certainly have a short fuse. Is a mere five minutes really worth getting that pissed over...?

As I had that thought, Kirino continued by saying something I most certainly had not expected.

"And I had been waiting since an hour beforehand! Can you believe her!?"

An hour beforehand!? H-how much were you looking forward to this? You make it sound like this was your first date.

Normally, you'd show up late and not care in the slightest.

"Umm...So is that what you're so mad about?"

"I'm mad about that too, but afterwards..."

After they had all gathered, it seemed they had entered Yodobashi Camera to do some window shopping. (This much could just barely be seen as a normal girl activity...or maybe not.)

They had looked at cell phones, they had looked at computers, and they had watched a demo movie being displayed on a TV in the video game section. (Apparently, it was for a game called Super something-or-other Wars) After wandering around the store long enough, they had tried out the new capsule vending machines.

That's right, capsule vending machines. The term had such a nostalgic ring to it. I used to love those...when I was in elementary school.

"I was the only one that just couldn't seem to get a secret one! Can you believe that!?"

"...Surely THAT isn't what you're mad about."

"Of course not. I kept at it until I got one~. Hmph. Don't underestimate a magazine model."

A teen magazine model decked out in Shibuya-kei fashion clutching a handful of 100 yen coins and buying capsule after capsule? In the Akiba Yodobashi? ... Now that's a surreal image.

To explain, Kirino is paid for her modeling work, so she has no lack of funds for her hobbies. When she said "don't underestimate a magazine model", that was likely what she was referring to.

At any rate, by sparing no expense, Kirino managed to acquire a "secret one" as she put it. After that, Saori introduced them to a restaurant called Star Kebab where they ate something known as a kebab sandwich.

"A nice foreigner runs the restaurant and it's one thing Akiba is well known for."

## "...Hmm."

...Well? When are you going to get to the reason you're mad? How long am I going to have to listen to a report of my little sister's walk through Akihabara? Actually, you suck at telling stories! Why are you telling me everything from beginning to end!? Who was late and who was on time and all that about the capsules is completely unnecessary, so do some editing and cut that stuff out of the story!

Of course, I was not about to share that wonderful insight with that sister of mine. She then told me about how they went to places such as Messe Sanoh and Sofmap to reserve games.

There was a question I had had since the time I went around Akiba with those three: Why do otaku go around to game store after game store after game store like that? They aren't clothing stores, so the products for sale should be the same.

"Why did you go all the way to an Akiba game store to reserve them? Couldn't you just buy them at a local store?"

"Each store has a different reservation bonus, you idiot. Like a telephone card or something."

The word "idiot" had held an amazing amount of contempt for a single word. If only she wouldn't act so threatening toward me all the time...

Incidentally, the reason she went with her otaku friends to reserve the games was so they could trade the reservation bonuses later. For instance, if all three of them reserved two games at Messe Sanoh, Sofmap, and Akibaoo, they would receive three different types of reservation bonus for each game. Afterwards, they could have a discussion to determine the best way to distribute the bonuses amongst themselves.

"There's a lot to all that, huh?" was all I could say.

They must have really wanted to collect goods related to a game they like.

Apparently, some people would buy them up in auctions, so Kirino may have actually been closer to normal by merely trading. As I said before, my little sister keeps her collection of games and goods in a hidden space behind her bookshelf. I had seen a portion of it on that fateful day, and it was a lineup that most certainly could not be shown to our parents. In fact, there was some further threat that I had yet to see lurking in the depths of that hidden space. It was quite a scary thought.

Kirino's story was still continuing.

"After that, we were worn out, so we started talking about just hanging around in Mister Donut."

I was getting worn out myself, so I was wondering if she could finally get to the point.

As I listened despite my boredom, Kirino finally seemed to reach something that seemed like the crux of the matter.

"And then that black one started arguing with me. She was mocking Meruru by saying it was just a kids anime."

Not again. How many times have you gotten into a fight over that!? Will you never grow tired of it!?

## To explain:

Kirino and Kuroneko were avid fans of the anime "Stardust☆Witch Meruru" and "maschera ~Lamentations of a Fallen Beast~" respectively. The two shows aired at the same time, so there was some antagonism between them.

"So I of course had no choice but to lose my temper, right? Well, I tell her how I bought the DVDs of that maschera show she likes so much and watched it, but the embarrassing chuuni<sup>[2]</sup> dialogue, the template jakigan setting, and all the 'I am strooooonnggg!!' powerleveling disgusted me, so I just couldn't enjoy it at all."

I actually had no idea what she had just said. Sometimes, I wonder if she is even speaking Japanese.

At any rate, I could tell she had gone out of the way to buy those DVDs and watch them just so she could bash it.

It took a spiteful person to go that far just to win an argument.

Although, I also decided she might have wanted to have something she could talk about with her friend.

"And you know what she says? She scoffs and says she hasn't seen Meruru's DVDs because it isn't worth spending her money on. And I bought every volume of maschera~! Apparently, Saori showed her an episode recorded from TV on her PSP, but that isn't the true Meruru! There's no way you can see the brilliant art properly on the tiny PSP screen! You need to watch the DVD version on a big screen! Well!? Are you listening you damn cat!?"

"Gweh...!? You id-...It's ME you're strangling! She isn't here!"

Pant...pant...Are you trying to kill me!?

I shook my sister's hands off and gasped for breath while holding my throat.

Hah...I get it now. You bought and watched all the DVDs of an anime recommended to you and yet she wouldn't do the same in return. That's why you're mad.

You need to remember that not all middle schoolers are overflowing with money like you.

After getting too worked up and almost strangling her brother to death, Kirino put her hand to her forehead and sighed.

"Hoo...And you know what? While we were going at it like that, that spiral glasses girl butts in and tells us to calm down."

That was the usual flow of events. As the leader of their otaku community, Saori was very tolerant and considerate. She would always act as a cushion between Kirino and Kuroneko.

From what Kirino told me, it seemed the following exchange continued from that point on.

"Hm, hm. From what I can see, you, Kuroneko-shi, and you, Kiririn-shi, are convinced that the anime the other loves is terrible. Of course, every work has those who like it and those who dislike it. But you two have more of a problem than that. You each have preconceptions and prejudices about the other's favorite anime and that is preventing you from enjoying it. If you watch something assuming it will be terrible, you will not be able to enjoy it. And so..." Saori clapped loudly. "In the near future, I suggest we hold an appreciation party for Meruru and maschera."

The point was to rid them of their preconceptions and prejudices about the other's favorite anime so they could come to a deeper mutual understanding.

The plan was to have them watch each anime together in an environment they agreed to and where they could comment on them to each other.

"After that, you can hold another debate over the merits of the two works."

That was the judgment Saori had given.

Yet another extremely otaku-ish idea. Would any normal person go that far over a mere anime? I guess it's going that far that makes one an otaku.

I of course knew better than to speak the phrase "a mere anime" out loud.

Saori then gave the following suggestion.

"For an occasion such as this, I would like to hold the event at Kiririn-shi's house."

"Hahh!? Why my house!?"

By the way, "Kiririn" was Kirino's screen name. Pretty damn unfitting, don't you think?

Saori and Kuroneko gave the following responses to Kirino's protest.

"Well, my place is too far away for everyone to gather."

"I don't have a large TV capable of playing DVDs in my house. Also, I have younger sisters, so I can't exactly have a filthy otaku and a sweets<sup>[3]</sup> coming by."

Kuroneko also had a talent for saying things that would rub people the wrong way.

I wasn't quite sure what she meant by "sweets", but I was amazed that there was someone who could have a proper argument with Kirino. Of course, those excuses were not enough for Kirino.

"I have my parents at home! It would be nothing but a nuisance to have the likes of you over!"

"Oh? Weren't you just saying a while ago that your parents would be out on Thursday for training, so you were going to be watching as much anime as possible right in the living room?"

"Kh... Why do you always pick up on things like that...?"

It was true. Ever since I had learned of her secret, Kirino always watched anime on the large TV in the living room while our parents were out. Apparently, she had been doing so when no one else was home even before that.

As she had been telling them to watch Meruru on a larger screen, Kirino had been cornered.

"Kuroneko-shi and I would love to see where our dear Kiririn-shi lives. Could you prepare the perfect viewing environment for our anime appreciation party? I will make sure to bring by the signed copy of Volume 1 of the Meruru manga that you have been wanting," said Saori, adding her own calm persuasion.

"...F-fine then!"

She had been overpowered by the bait Saori had dangled before her.

"...and that's what happened," said Kirino finishing her story.

I could only give a curt, "Hmm...", in response.

After all, it had nothing to do with me. And my little sister having friends over was hardly anything worth making a fuss over. Also, I had plans that Thursday, so I wouldn't even be home.

I see...So they're coming here. Hmm, with Kirino and Kuroneko together, I'm sure there'll be quite a fight. That worries me a bit.

Well, Saori will be there too, so everything should be fine.

Overall, I was relatively indifferent about the idea.

On Thursday, I had school off due to a holiday, so I spent the day with my childhood friend.

We went to the bookstore in front of the station to look at reference books, ate lunch in the park on the way back, and spent the rest of the day chatting and snacking at her house. Overall, it was an utterly normal day.

That time was dull and calm. Nothing notable occurred and I grew sleepy.

That type of mediocre lifestyle is exactly what I had always hoped for, so I was glad it could continue uninterrupted.

This is just my personal opinion, but I think happiness is a moment where you can honestly say you are completely okay with yourself and your surroundings.

In that way, I felt my life was heading fully in the right direction.

I bet it makes you jealous. I took pride in those types of mediocre, normal, calm, and boring days that I hoped I would happily be able to continue having until the day I died. To put it simply, I was satisfied with my life.

Of course, my little sister would always smash that normalcy to pieces.

And that is precisely what happened on that day. I parted ways with my childhood friend at 3 PM and walked home while staring blankly up at the sky and yawning.

Hmm, I think I'll read some manga and take a nap to kill time until dinner.

As I returned home with that thought in mind, I noticed a pair of unfamiliar shoes in the entranceway.

They were small, black shoes with frilly decorations. They were clearly not Kirino's style.

"Hm? ...Oh."

I quickly recalled that the anime appreciation party was being held at our house that day.

Kirino's otaku friends must have been over to play.

I walked up the stairs and placed my things in my room. I washed my hands, rinsed out my mouth, and then headed for the living room to get a drink from the fridge.

"...It sure is quiet."

Pretty odd, don't you think? Knowing them, I had assumed they would be shouting at each other in some kind of argument.

When I opened the door, the room was completely dark. It seemed the curtain was drawn.

They're not here? I guess they must be in Kirino's room.

I flipped the switch and the light flickered as it turned on. The fluorescent light must have been about to die.

Hm, we need to buy a replacement before long-



"Wah!"

I almost jumped back the instant the light came fully on.

I did so because I had noticed a girl wearing all black calmly seated on the couch right in front of me. She looked like a queen seated in her throne. She was staring me down with a gaze that felt like pure ice.

As I stiffened and was at a loss for words, she grinned.

"...Heh. Well done making it this far. Most admirable."

"This is my house," I immediately shot back.

Who does she think she is, some villainous boss?

That gothic lolita girl was Kuroneko. I thought of her as Kirino's otaku/arguing friend.

The question I was left with was why she was sitting alone in the pitch black living room after coming to our house to play. I finally managed to get out my first question.

"What are you doing?"

"...Nothing really."

She turned away from me. I had no idea what she was thinking, but I could somehow tell she was feeling down.

Silence returned to the living room. It was truly awkward.

After all, I was alone with my little sister's friend and she wasn't saying anything. What was I supposed to do?

"Nothing, hm? Sigh..."

This girl is as difficult to deal with as ever.

Since you've come all the way to your friend's house, how about you at least say hello to that friend's older brother?

I had no idea what to do in that odd situation, so I just opened the curtains to let some light in. The evening sunlight eliminated all dimness from the room.

I turned around to find Kuroneko squeezing both eyes shut. Her previous cool aura was completely gone. It was the same reaction you get when you poke at a kitten's forehead.

"Sorry, is it too bright?"

"I cannot stand the light of the sun."

What are you, a vampire? Oh, wait. Is that a line from some anime?

"Well, make yourself at ho-...I guess you already have," I said, stalling for time as I tried to figure out what to do.

I decided I first needed a grasp of the situation.

"By the way, where's Kirino?"

"In her room."

Hmm, in that case...

"Where's Saori? Is she with Kirino?"

"She didn't come."

"Eh?"

She didn't come?

"Why not?"

"Something came up so she couldn't come. She went out of her way to come by my house yesterday and give me this."

Kuroneko pulled out a Stardust Witch Meruru manga volume. It must have been the signed copy Kirino had mentioned Saori had promised her. Whatever it was that had come up, she was a very conscientious person.

"I would like for you to take this."

"Fine."

As I took the signed volume from Kuroneko, I thought.

Saori didn't come because something came up. Hmmm, so that's it.

...Mh...I have a bad feeling about this. Wait, wait, wait a second...

"It was just you and Kirino here today?"

"...Yes..."

Now I think I get it...But wouldn't that mean...?

If Saori hadn't come, it would have been just Kirino and Kuroneko trying to hold an anime appreciation party.

Now that was something that would clearly never happen! That goes beyond having mortal enemies sharing a boat!

When those two got together, they almost always got into a fight. How was that supposed to work?

I see! I see, I see, I see, I see. I get it now! It's all coming together!

"And you know what happened then?"

"You got into a fight with Kirino, didn't you?"

"Heh. So you understand. Exactly."

At that point, we both fell silent while still facing each other. I had a fairly good idea what must have happened.

Kuroneko had come to our house for the anime appreciation party. However, Saori had not been there as usual to mediate Kuroneko and Kirino's fights.

When Kirino and Kuroneko unexpectedly ended up alone together...

Well, they must have gotten into a huge fight like usual. And with no one to mediate...

My bet was that Kirino had gotten sulky and holed up in her room.

Meanwhile, Kuroneko had faded into the darkness of the living room.

That was only my guess, but I was fairly confident in its general accuracy. I had to wonder if they really had no desire to get along after Kuroneko came all the way to our house for the party.

"...Hmm."

However, there was one aspect of the situation that I had to make sure not to overlook.

Despite the fight occurring in our house, Kirino had not kicked Kuroneko out.

Also, Kuroneko had still come despite knowing Saori was not coming and she was still there.

Well? Do you think I was overthinking things? I don't think so. After all, I had gone to various places with those three and had seen how Kirino and Kuroneko acted towards each other each time.

My conclusion was-

"You're coming up with some ridiculous idea, aren't you?"

"N-no...of course not," I denied with a stiff smile.

She's surprisingly sharp.

Well, I guess it really isn't any of my business.

I don't think I can last much longer under this damn heavy atmosphere surrounding the house. I only just got home, but I guess I could head out to the arcade and kill some time...

Just as I was thinking that, the cell phone in my back pocket began to vibrate. It was as if it had been timed.

"...Mh."

I had received an email. I had a bad feeling about it and – sure enough – it was from Saori.

Kyousuke-shi. I shall leave the rest to thee.

.....

I stared at my cell phone's screen with dead eyes.

- "...Oh, shall thee, Saori-shi?" I muttered dejectedly.
- "...Oh, you just turned into Maro<sup>[4]</sup> for a second. Did you just go insane?"
- "...It's nothing," was my discouraged reply to Kuroneko who looked completely at home as she flipped through a weekly manga magazine that had been lying nearby.

Now then, what do I do about this?

I tried to get my brain working on a way to fix the situation. I no longer had the option to ditch them and head out to have some fun. This was because I owed Saori for what she had done over the past few months.

After everything she'd done, I simply couldn't turn down her request. I had to do something.

Damn her. Why did she have to send that email with such impeccable timing?

Saori was quite perceptive, so she may have been able to predict everything that had happened thus far as far back as when she realized she could not come. And her solution had been to have me carry out her usual role. That may be exaggerating her perception, but that was how it seemed to me.

What a pain.

Well, I guess I have no choice. She asked me to take care of this anime appreciation party.

Let's see...um...First, I need to talk to Kuroneko and Kirino to find out what they got into a fight over. Then I have to somehow pacify them to the point where they can watch anime together. But they're sure to get into another fight then, so I'll have to pacify them again.

My goal was to let them enjoy themselves so they could strengthen their relationship.

I had to act as the cushion between them in Saori's place.

"Ugh, it gives me a stomachache just thinking about it."

Is this what she's always doing? But she's always laughing and making that  $\omega$  face. Hoo. You really don't realize people's value until they're gone...

It wasn't an easy thing to do. I renewed my gratitude for Saori's friendship with my sister.

"What was that about a stomachache?"

"Nothing."

Okay, time to do this.

I pulled myself together and took action. I decided to start with the girl right in front of me.

"By the way, what were you and Kirino fighting about? Was it anime?"

"No," said Kuroneko emotionlessly.

However, she just fell silent there and gave no additional explanation.

I patiently waited and finally she sighed and continued.

"I did not come here because I wanted to get in a fight. I knew Saori would not be here and I tried to act accordingly. I came here to watch anime, but I made an effort not to say anything about anime. I think she did the same."

"I...see."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"O-of course not."

I didn't have a problem with it; I was just surprised.

That makes sense. She was going over to a friend's house for fun. She wouldn't want to choose a topic that would likely lead to a fight.

"Then what did you get into a fight over?"

"A cell phone novel," spat out Kuroneko in annoyance.

What the hell is a cell phone novel? ...Oh, are they those things written and read on cell phones that are popular with girls these days? They are something like a novel I think. That may be a bit off, but I guess it's close. I think they've been making books and movies out of them recently.

"What about this cell phone novel?"

" 'Heh hehn. I wrote a cell phone novel. You've written manga and novels before, right? How about you read mine? Personally, I'd say it's a masterpiece~.' "

"I see."

Her impression was spot on. The way the "heh hehn" got on my nerves made me think she was actually channeling Kirino.

The idea of Kirino writing a cell phone novel seemed disturbingly fitting. It sounded exactly like what a modern girl would do.

From the odd confidence in Kuroneko's impression, I guessed it was Kirino's first one.

"Was it bad?"

"It made me want to kill her."

It was that bad!? What the hell was it about!? That actually makes me curious!

I've gotten mad when reading really bad novels and manga before, but being so bad you want to kill whoever wrote it is something else entirely!

Kuroneko must have been able to tell what I was thinking from my expression because she expressionlessly began to explain.

"First of all, the protagonist is a dead ringer for the author and she even refers to herself with 'atashi' just like the author."

"Now I want to kill her too!"

That was all it took for me to know exactly how "refined" the contents of that novel had to be.

"A-and it isn't just that. She carelessly starts a new line every two or three characters, she starts a new page whenever the hell she feels like it, and there are more emoticons and symbols than punctuation. In fact, there is hardly any punctuation in the entire thing. She mixes first person and third person together making it incredibly hard to read, she switches points of view and uses cutbacks like crazy, the first person sections are written in exactly the way she speaks, half the novel is made up of singing her own praises, and she even breaks the fourth wall to have the author and the characters speak. And on top of all that..." Kuroneko paused her flowing speech for a second. "A gothic lolita character named Kuroneko that is clearly modeled after me gets raped to death."

"That's horrible!!"

That's clearly done only out of spite! Anyone would get mad if their friend showed them something like that!

"...Um, I really am sorry about all that."

Kuroneko nodded and fell silent once more.

I had no idea what to do, so I tried to bring the conversation somewhere less dangerous.

"B-but y'know, you really do know a lot about writing. You also draw manga, right?"

"I don't know...that much. I'm really only barely past being a complete beginner."

Kuroneko glanced over toward me.

Okay, this isn't completely hopeless. Go for it!

"No, I'd say you deserve more credit than that. If I had read my sister's cell phone novel, I would have had no idea how to explain what was wrong with it. You were only able to say what you did because you know the proper way of doing things. You actually know what to look for!"

"...Heh. You seem to be mistaken about something." Now, Kuroneko completely turned back toward me. She seemed to have latched onto the topic I had brought up. "Whether you are talking about manga or novels, there is no 'absolute right answer' as to how to make them. In my opinion, using a lot of onomatopoeia, making constant new lines, using emoticons, or any other method one may choose are not necessarily bad things. And the cell phone novel is an especially new medium. Acting like an expert and saying everything must be made in the 'proper' way is not necessarily correct. You can follow the many rules polished up over the years by our ancestors, you can follow the latest trends, and you can come up with some new strategy for grabbing popularity. Each of those things is a 'right answer'. None of them are wrong. However, you should not deny methods other than those either. Looking down on others and going on and on about the 'right way' of doing things and acting like an expert just makes you look like a fool. The shitheads who ramble on and on about a sense of wonder and other things without ever actually saying anything of substance are just as foolish. What matters is why you are writing it. That answer will of course be different for each and every person and you will have over a hundred million stories to be told if you gather a hundred people. That is why you can never find an absolutely 'right' way of doing it. Heh. It's nothing but an amateur's conclusion, but I would say literary works should be made out of a desire to make them not as a job."

Just like Kirino, she became quite loquacious when it came to her fields of interest.

Her overly aggressive manner of speech showed just how angry she was.

"The list I was angrily giving to you earlier was nothing more than what I personally disliked. Please make no mistake about that."

"...I see."

I honestly had no idea what she meant, but it seemed Kuroneko had been able to let off some much needed steam.

Her depressed mood from earlier had lessened.

One down. That just leaves...

"Anyway, I'll go prepare some drinks and snacks. Just wait here."

"I came to a girl's house, so why am I instead spending the time with her older brother?"

"I honestly don't know."

Can someone please tell me why I'm spending my holiday working to put my little sister's friend in a good mood?

I left the living room and walked up the stairs.

I was not preparing snacks; I was on my way to speak with my sister.

"Kirino...Hey. I know you're in there. Open up."

I knocked lightly so that Kuroneko would not be able to hear from the living room.

After I had knocked for a while, the door violently opened. It was as if opening the door had been an attack aimed at my face. However, after so many times, I was prepared for that attack. I stopped the door with one hand.

Kirino clicked her tongue with an expression that said, "Tch. I missed..."

"...What do you want?"

"Don't play dumb. What are you doing up here instead of having fun with your friend?"

"Playing eroge. I was just reading the blog of my true little sisters."

"...!!!"

Don't give that kind of answer so boldly! You're giving your brother a headache here!

"What's with that ugly face? You gotta problem with it?"

"Um, yes!? No one calls their friend over to their house and then just plays games alone!"

"...Hah? What, do you want us to play an eroge together? Heh. Perverts like you really do have a different way of thinking."

"Y-you bitch..."

Gyahhh!! You piss me off! And how can you say that playing an eroge together is a pervert's way of thinking? I seem to recall you ordering me to play an eroge with you three months ago!

That pervert is always blaming other people for the exact things she does!

Kh...no, I need to calm down. I'm trying to get them to make up, so I can't be getting into a fight with her myself.

I gritted my teeth and shoved the anger deep into my chest.

"Kirino-san...Your friend is over, so I think it would be best if you would spend time with her."

"Shut up."

Kirino narrowed her eyes in displeasure and tried to close the door.

Wh-why you...!

I managed to stop her by putting my own body in the door's path.

"Owww!"

You slammed that shut as hard as you could! You clearly saw what I was doing and a normal person would have at least slowed down the door! But you actually put more force into it, didn't you!?

"Ueh. What a disgusting feeling."

You're making it sound like you just stepped on a frog! It's your brother that you crushed here!

Why does it always take so much effort whenever I try to have a conversation with my sister!? Shit! This just isn't right!

At any rate, my actions paid off and my sister's escape route was blocked. I was in an incredibly pathetic position, but I could at least speak to her. First I had to hear Kirino's explanation of why she got into a fight with Kuroneko.

"Y-you know, your friend went out of her way to come over, so at least try to get along. Don't just fight."

For some reason, I constantly had to tell my sister things like that that should be obvious.

"I-is that normally the position someone tries to persuade someone from?" said Kirino in a voice that sounded almost surprising admiring of her brother who was caught in the door.

Of course, if she was truly admiring of what I had done, don't you think she would have lessened the force keeping me pinned there? Kirino did not exactly go along with my desire, but she did give me a response.

"I wouldn't call that...thing...a friend. And it's because of her that we got into a fight~!"

"Liar. Kuroneko told me you had a character in your cell phone novel that was similar to her and you had the character raped to death. You're clearly the one at fault here!"

"Hah!? What are you talking about!? You've got it all wrong!"

"Wh-what do I have wrong?"

Without answering my question, Kirino let go of the door and entered her room.

As I freed myself from my crushed position, my head was filled with question marks.

Kirino used a finger to invite me into her room.

"Come in."

"S-sure..."

As usual, I was very reluctant to enter my little sister's room.

It was a refreshing room that was colored red overall. It had an oddly sweet smell to it.

It had a bed, a computer desk, a bookshelf, etc. Basically, nothing about it was out of the ordinary. Perhaps because she had known friends were going to be coming over, a fold-up table was set up in the center of the room. A cell phone and some black books were placed atop that table.

Kirino sat down on her bed and pointed toward one of the black books.

"Read that for a bit."

"Wh-what is it? And what does it have to do with what we're talking about...?"

As my sister had ordered, I picked up the indicated black book and flipped through it. The cover had an illustration of a gothic lolita girl drawn in the style of a painting. The title was written in stylish cursive English.

And as for the contents...

"A manga...and...a novel...?"

"And excessively thick supplementary materials."

"...What the hell is it?"

"A doujinshi. It's a derivative work of maschera that Kuroneko made," spat out Kirino in annoyance with a slight frown.

Simply put, a doujinshi was a book created out of pocket that was then bought and sold at some kind of event. A derivative work was one that used the setting or characters of an existing anime or manga. All of that had been explained to me back when I had been dragged to that offline meeting, so I had some knowledge of it.

"So what about this doujinshi?"

" 'Heh... Then while I read this cell phone novel that clearly reeks of terrible writing, you can read this. You watched every episode of maschera, right?'

"I see."

Her impression was spot on. The way the "heh" made it so clear she was looking down on you made me think she was actually channeling Kuroneko.

A doujinshi made by Kuroneko, hm? I can already guess something she made would not fit Kirino's tastes...

"Was it bad?"

"It made me want to kill her."

It was that bad!? And didn't I just have almost this exact conversation with Kuroneko!?

"Wh-what is it about?"

"...Tch. It's what's known as a 'retrogressive story' and the protagonist is quite a 'U-1'."

"Is that some kind of code?"

From the literal meaning of the words, I could take a guess at what a retrogressive story was, but the term U-1 was a complete mystery. My first guess was that it had something to do with a martial arts tournament.

Kirino must have guessed what my questions were because she explained with a displeased expression.

"Retrogressive story and U-1 are terms used when describing derivative works. As you might guess from the meaning of retrogressive, a retrogressive story is a story where the protagonist travels back in time. To use Evangelion as an example, if you have a story where Ikari Shinji travels back in time from the world after the finale to the time of the first episode with all his memories of the events intact and then redoes his fight against the angels, that would be a retrogressive story. Having memories of the events gives the protagonist courage, so he can change history as he sees fit. Authors of derivative works are pinned down by the original story's setting, so this allows them to make a completely different story to the original."

"Hmm."

I wasn't quite sure what she meant since I had never actually seen Evangelion.

However, I caught enough to figure out that she meant it was a story where the protagonist had an overwhelming advantage at the start in order to "make a completely different story from the original".

"And U-1 refers to adding all sorts of extra things to the protagonist to make him or her almost almighty and the strongest character. You could say they are the descendent of a demon king but the powers gained from that blood is usually sealed, you could have them win over any member of the opposite sex with just a smile but the protagonist doesn't realize it, you could have seraphim wings grow from their back when they go all out, or you could have them actually have S rank level powers but only be B-rank due to not applying for S-rank. At a time, those things were popular in the derivative works of a popular eroge and the term U-1 came about as a parody of the name of the game's protagonist. The term Super Shinji has pretty much the same meaning."

"Th-that's all a little confusing..."

First Kirino's excessively detailed rant and now this! This is going to be harder than I thought!

"So anyway, you were saying the doujinshi Kuroneko wrote had a retrogressive story and a U-1..."

"Right. After the final boss of the first season of maschera, Queen of Nightmares, was defeated by the show's protagonist, Shikkoku, she "retrogressed" to the time of the first episode with all her memories intact. From there, she possessed the corpse of a female character that died in the original story and approached Shikkoku as a normal girl. And that's just how it starts."

"Mh...So unlike the original, the final boss becomes the protagonist."

"Right. That black one is always cosplaying as Queen of Nightmares, so she's clearly projecting herself into the place of the protagonist of her own work. At that point it was already so painful that I had goose bumps. Oeh..."

You said all that to Kuroneko, didn't you? I can see how that would start a fight.

You really are the one at fault here.

"So why was that enough for you to want to kill her? I mean this art...well, I don't like how pointed the chins are, but it's not bad overall. And from what you told me of the story, it sounds a little interesting."

"Hah! ...Don't act like you know what you're talking about just from hearing a brief summary and glancing at the art. The worst parts of this doujinshi aren't something you can see on the surface."

### "...And those things are?"

"It doesn't just jump out at you? Look through all the pages. This book is incredibly hard to read," muttered Kirino frankly as she pointed at the pages of the novel portion. "Look how black this page is. Over 90% of it is a wall of text. Why doesn't she hit the enter key every so often!? Also, she uses all sorts of difficult kanji and expressions. She goes on and on about parts of the setting I couldn't care less about. She clearly isn't thinking about the people who will be reading it at all. And the battle scenes are the worst of all! They're so hard to read! If you're having an explosion, can't you just put in a line saying Boooom!? Onomatopoeia exists for a reason. When you use it, anyone can tell what's happening at a glance. And when someone's attacking, she needs to have the character yell 'Ohhhh!' and when a character takes damage they need to yell 'Gyaahh!' That makes it all so much easier to understand and easier to read. That way anyone can read it, right? If you ask me, her novel is nothing more than self satisfaction."

I never read novels, so I had no way to know whether the things she was saying were right or not.

But even so, the way she said them pissed me off.

In fact, what Kirino was mentioning was how she wrote her cell phone novel. With a different genre and medium, the valid methods probably changed. Also, Kuroneko hadn't written that novel to sell, so I felt there was nothing wrong with writing it with a focus on self satisfaction.

"And this doujinshi comes with a separate book that has about 200 pages of supplementary materials. If you don't read it first so you can understand the original terminology that doesn't even exist in the original series, you

won't be able to understand half of the actual doujinshi. Oh, and her original terminology just reeks of chuunibyou. Look at this: God-Demon Utter Destruction Shock! I can't read a string of kanji like that! And it has some lame katakana ruby added on. And it's some weird German or something! And what gets to me the most..." While grinding her teeth, Kirino paused for a second before spitting out the rest. "An original character clearly modeled off of me had the magic spell Charm cast on her so she becomes the protagonist's sex slave."

"You're free to get mad about that!"

A few seconds before, I had thought Kirino was at fault for the fight, but at that point, I suddenly lost all desire to defend Kuroneko.

What is that gothic lolita girl doing to my sister!? They're both at fault in this fight!

And you both did almost the exact same thing!

They had both put the other in their works and had them meet some horrible fate.

They had let the other read their work while looking down on them.

That had led to a fight, to Kirino sulking, and to the current situation.

"...Sigh."

But Kirino, you...

"Did you read that entire ridiculously thick supplementary book?"

"Hah? Of course I did. If I didn't, I would have no right to complain about it."

That was just how she was. What do you think? Makes you want to scowl, doesn't it?

It makes you wonder how well they actually got along.

If Saori had been there, she would surely have roared with laughter will holding her belly.

God, what troublesome girls...

At that point, I had heard both sides of the story, so I had cleared the second stage.

I just had to bring them from the current situation to one where they could hold the anime appreciation party.

I had no idea if I could manage it, but I decided to do what I could.

Oh, and I had one last thought.

Middle school girls shouldn't suddenly start saying things about sex slaves! I'll make sure to stop you next time!

I entered the living room with a tray containing snacks and drinks.

Kuroneko was seated on the couch, relaxing. She was in the place Kirino usually used, so it felt a little odd. I almost felt like I was talking to my little sister when I spoke.

"Sorry about the wait."

"You had better be. How long does it take to prepare snacks and drinks?" muttered Kuroneko while looking down at one of Kirino's teen magazines.

Why are you so demanding when you're a visitor in someone's house? You really do remind me of a certain someone.

With that thought in mind, I lined the snacks and drinks up on the table.

Now then, time to begin.

I also placed a DVD case on the table.

"It took some doing to get this."

"This is..."

Kuroneko's eyes narrowed upon seeing the DVD case.

The DVD I had brought was the first volume of Stardust☆Witch Meruru.

"Why did you bring this here?"

"I borrowed it so we could watch it together. Let's watch it on that big screen so we can see the true Meruru," I said in voice half-filled with resignation.

With no change of expression, Kuroneko's gaze turned toward me.

"Have you ever seen this anime?"

"No. In fact, I never really watch anime. But after hearing Kirino go on and on about how good it is, I'm a bit interested. It would help me out if you help explain some things."

After a bit of silence, Kuroneko finally picked up the Meruru DVD case, scrutinized it deeply, and then held it out toward me.

"Here."

"...Okay."

I took the DVD case, walked up to the TV, and put it in.

After the DVD disk tray slid back in, the TV screen lit up.

It was displaying the menu screen. I ignored the various special features like bonus footage and voice actor interviews, chose the "from the beginning" option, and hit the button on the controller.

A pink-haired girl wearing an oddly suggestive outfit walked out from the edge of the screen.

She spun around in the center of the screen with a "kururin." sound effect, held up a wand (or was it a spear?), and shouted out in a high-pitched loli voice.

"Stardust☆Witch Meruru♪ Begins noooowww♪"

O-oh, no. This is way more embarrassing than I thought it would be...!

I could feel my face growing red.

However, I couldn't exactly suggest we stop after being the one to suggest we watch it.

I gritted my teeth and entered defense mode.

However, what happened next ripped my defenses to shreds like they were made of paper.

The screen changed to show a girl standing in a field. She looked a lot like Meruru, but she was wearing normal clothes. She was also wearing a red randoseru, so I guessed she was in elementary school.

The girl shut her eyes and held her hands together as if praying. The camera started circling around her, a pink light and stardust started flowing out from the girl, and music started playing.

The girl spun around wrapped in light. Her clothes started disappearing one by one. First her shirt, then her skirt, then her camisole, and then her panties.

"Isn't this a bit much!? Can they even show this on TV!?"

"This is the DVD version, so there is no problem. I believe most areas had a censored version where tons of ribbons and stars covered up the heroine's nudity. I remember people on Nico Nico Douga going crazy uploading the uncensored transformation scene that was aired on TV Aichi."

"..."

A cold sweat stared pouring from my forehead.

Why do I have to watch an elementary school girl's strip show with my little sister's friend?

I looked over toward the living room door, hoping for rescue.

But there was no sign of anyone opening the door.

Dammit, still? That girl needs to get her ass down here.

While I frowned, the tension of the music rose and rose.

And then the title, "Stardust ₩Witch Meruru", was displayed.

As soon as it did, Kuroneko whispered, "The first reason I simply cannot enjoy this anime..."

A shooting sta~r sparkling in space~ 
\$\text{\pi}\$ Blasting my enemies with a magical iet~

Shooting through the sky and falling to Earth from a magical land, here I am~

Stardust Witch Meruru~

"...is the nonsense theme song."

"Gh...uuh..."

I could feel my face growing pale.

This is indeed...painful...

I don't think this is just a difference in tastes between otaku and normal people. Kuroneko looks like she's suffering, too.

"Hoo...Hey, do you want to play a video game? Kirino has some in her room, so..."

Just as I reached for the controller, Kuroneko grabbed my wrist.

"I thought we were going to experience the true Meruru? At the very least, we need to endure this level of embarrassment."

"U-uuh..."

What idiot was it that suggested we watch Meruru!?

As I listened to the theme song, "Meteo☆Impact" (sung by Hoshino Kurara, the voice actress for the protagonist Akaboshi Meru (Meruru)), I was overwhelmed by embarrassment and regret.

Shoo~ting Star~♪ Shoo~ting Star~♪ Charging straight for your chest.

With a power (Kira☆) larger than a meteorite (Kira☆)

I will aim for your heart. So. When. My full power My all-out magic

Comes your way, make sure to catch it all~♡

"Hey, did that kid just blow an enemy away with a giant laser while singing the chorus?"

"The lyrics are basically saying 'I am going to fire all my magic at you at point blank range, so don't run away'. What a disturbing anime."

According to Kuroneko's explanation, Meteo Impact was the name of Meruru's ultimate attack.

She would go into a spin in midair and strike the enemy, piercing the enemy through the heart with the tip of her wand.

She would then fly at high speed and low altitude with the enemy still skewered and dragging the enemy along the ground.

After that, she would fly back high into the sky and spin around, performing essentially a giant swing with the enemy on her wand. Centrifugal force would slam the enemy to the ground and she would finish things off by yelling "Gooo! Meteo Impaaaact!" and firing a giant laser straight down.

"The protagonist performs that string of attacks with an innocent smile on her face all the while. I do not think it is right to do such repulsive things while pretending to be a children's anime."

Well, that ultimate attack IS harsher than what you find in some shounen manga. The rival girl she was facing in the opening was probably torn to pieces.

"Lately, too many works are shoving loli and fanservice to the forefront to get sales. And not just in anime. I have no problem with making something to answer the demand out there, but something this blatant is too much. I hate all this talk about unprecedented levels of DVD sales. In my opinion, we should be lamenting the fact that this kind of vulgar trash is selling. The masses need to develop better aesthetic sense."

I was still trying to figure out how to respond to that, when...

"You just don't understand!"

The door was violently kicked open and someone stormed in.

"K-Kirino..."

I pretended to be surprised, but I was secretly relieved.

O-okay, somehow or other, this is working.

When I had borrowed Meruru from Kirino I had told her to come down to the living room because Saori's present was there.

That girl is about as stubborn as you can get, so I had known she would never come down if I tried to convince her normally.

However, I had guessed that she would be unable to resist barging in if she heard Kuroneko and me watching and talking about her precious Meruru.

Just as planned. Wow, look how mad she is.

"Meruru's theme is friendship! Don't start making up crap about it being repulsive just because maschera's DVDs didn't sell! And you think you have 'better aesthetic sense'? Hah! Quit acting so self-important. You're practically blind when it comes to aesthetic sense. Is your 'better aesthetic sense' what leads you to call everything trash just because you can't understand what's so good about it? You're such an idiot that you can't even see the message the writers have put into Meruru. Actually, how far did you watch on the PSP, you damn cat? Surely you at least got as far as the end of the first season!"

"What are you doing here? No one asked for you."

"Shut up! I just came down to get a drink, but then I heard something I simply couldn't overlook! ...Well!? How far did you get!?"

Kirino stomped forward and Kuroneko glanced at the intruder with cold eyes.

"Partway through episode 6."

"Wait! Why would you stop there!? That's a really good part!"

"The friend infected by an Evil Star parasite and turned into a Dark Witch in the A-part was mercilessly vaporized by Meruru in the B-part. She used Meteo Impact on her. I had felt obligated to at least watch to the end of season 1, but that was the last straw. How can you call that a story about friendship? Could you perhaps explain that to me?"

"Hahh? What show were you watching? She had no choice but to do that at the time. If she hadn't, the earth would've been destroyed and then Aru-chan would have died all the same."

"Even so, smiling and yelling "Gooo! Meteo Impaaaact!" when it's your best friend is simply unthinkable. That girl is a natural-born psychopathic killer."

"Don't worry! She was revived afterwards! Before the battle, Meruru had set up a Magical Field, and anyone killed or anything damaged in one of those is healed or fixed afterwards!"

"So they just rip off other shows? ... Anyway, I don't like it, but I will admit that, with that magic available, that was the best decision at the time. However, it is still wrong how unhesitant she was and how she was not shown shedding even a single tear. Is a side effect of using magic inciting murderous urges or something?"

"Shut up! Quit being so picky! What does it matter anyway? She saved her in the end! Aru-chan even thanked Meruru for saving her!"

"And that is why I am saying it is nothing but a children's anime. It depicts so little that you can barely tell what happened."

"You sure are stubborn. ...But wasn't it so cool when she used her new ultimate attack and was twirling all over the place with god-tier art?"

"Perhaps, but she was still murdering her best friend."

"Like! I! Said!"

Why are anime otaku so damn annoying!?

I was getting sick of the argument, but Kirino and Kuroneko were merely continuing on noisily as always.

Suddenly, Kuroneko grabbed the controller and paused the footage on the TV.

"Heh. You said the glorious artwork could not be truly seen on a small screen, right? In that case, let's watch it right now. Bring out the DVD with episode 6 on it."

Those belligerent words were clearly a challenge.

"Oh, now you've said it! There's no going back now. I'll be right back with it." Kirino pointed straight at Kuroneko's face. "Hah! I can't wait to see the tears in your eyes!"

She then ran up the stairs.

What are you, a child?

God, what a pain. Although, it looks like the anime appreciation party might happen after all. It's still too early to relax, though.

I looked in the direction of the door my little sister had left through and sighed.

In the end, time ran out after we finished watching Meruru episode 6. The anime appreciation party had only lasted 30 minutes, but that was the best we could do. If I had come home earlier things might have been different.

As soon as it reached five o'clock, Kuroneko said she was leaving. I did not even need to ask why she had to leave at what seemed like an elementary school kid's curfew.

Meruru and maschera both aired on Thursday's at 5:30.

By the way, Kirino and Kuroneko had continued arguing in the same way the entire time we watched Meruru. I wasn't sure if they were a good match or a terrible match as friends, but I tried to pacify them, humor them, and praise them. In return, I was slapped, kicked, and verbally abused. Amid all that, I somehow managed to outlast and fill my role as the cushion between Kirino and Kuroneko.

You can probably already tell from what you've seen of this so far, but it wasn't easy.

I gained some serious respect for Saori for always smiling while doing that. I mean, it was basically like having two Kirinos. A scary thought, I know. To be honest, I was saved thanks to the fact that it ended after only half an hour.

"I'll be borrowing this," said Kuroneko, standing in the entrance of the Kousaka residence and holding up a paper bag.

The bag contained the Stardust%Witch Meruru DVDs we had not been able to watch due to lack of time.

Arms folded, Kirino gave a triumphant reply.

"Heh hehn. Looks like you've finally awoken to the wonders of Meruru."

"Please don't be so foolish. I will admit that a portion of the art in the battle scenes was fantastic and that the DVD version did an excellent job of correcting the terrible art from the TV version. However, my opinion that the story is shit remained unchanged. ...Heh. It has barely enough value for me to feel obligated to watch it to the end."

"Wow, are you stubborn. Couldn't you just be honest and say you liked it and want to see more?"

I glared at Kirino thinking, You're not one to talk.

I then pulled myself together and looked back toward Kuroneko.

"Thanks for playing with Kirino today." I relaxed my shoulders and smiled a bit. "Come back anytime. We can have a proper anime appreciation party next time."

Kuroneko stared me straight in the eye.

"There is something I have been curious about for a while now. This is as good a chance as any, so I'll ask now. Why do you do these things for your sister despite how cruelly she treats you?"

Now that was a good question. I honestly didn't know. It had started out with me just going with the flow and it was actually still that way. But that's not all there was to it, was it? I'd rather not admit that, though.

In the end, there was only one thing I could say.

"Sorry, I don't really know."

"...Are you a siscon?"

"It's definitely not that!"

Why would you say that!? Of course I'm not!

As I denied it with everything I could, I was kicked in the Achilles tendon by the tips of someone's toes.

"Ow-...What the hell are you doing!?"

I turned around in anger to find Kirino staring at me with a contemptuous gaze.

"...Gross."

Honestly, what the hell!? I know you don't like the idea of me being a siscon, but I wasn't the one to say it! In fact, I denied it! You don't have to kick me out of the blue like that!

As I continued getting kicked, Kuroneko said, "...Are you a masochist?"

"It's not that either!"

I think!

"...Then what is it?" asked Kuroneko as she tilted her head to the side.

For some reason, she seemed quite attached to that subject. She did not seem as if she would quit until I gave her a satisfactory reason.

I guess I have no choice...

I scratched at my head and tried to give form to the concept I was having trouble putting to words.

After searching for the right words, I finally uttered a truly hackneyed line.

"...It's because we're siblings...I guess."

I averted my gaze and massaged my temples.

I clicked my tongue in an attempt to draw attention away from the heat in my face.

This is hopeless. I'm the one that said it and I know that doesn't cut it as a reason. There's no way Kuroneko will accept it.

Or so I thought.

"...I see. Understood."

Kuroneko nodded slightly.

Her soft voice gradually filled my chest.

"What an excellent older brother. I am quite jealous," she whispered to Kirino.

Normally, Kirino would have responded with something like "What was that, sarcasm?", but she only continued frowning with her arms folded. Some kind of silent exchange went on between them, but I could only watch without understanding what it meant.

After the silence had continued for a bit, Kirino finally arrogantly said "hmph" and narrowed her eyes toward Kuroneko.

"Hehh.	What's th	s? Is he yo	our type?	What terrible	taste."
"	"				

Kuroneko remained silent but her eyes opened wide.

"I won't stop you, but let me warn you. He only likes ugly girls."

"What the fuck did you just say!? Who are you calling an ugly girl! Depending on your answer, I'll kick your ass even if you are my little sister!"

"Ugh, and now you get mad again. Fine, fine. I'm sorry~."

Kirino mockingly shrugged.

Why you...! That attitude is just going too far!

I was about to speak my complaint out loud, but Kirino turned back toward Kuroneko.

"If you want him, you can have him. In fact, he disgusts me, so just take him home with you."

"Why you..."

As my fist trembled in anger, Kuroneko expressionlessly watched us.

"Only likes ugly girls?" she whispered. "Hmm..."

A cold satisfaction exuded from her. She then turned her harsh gaze on Kirino.

"Hah. Please make no ridiculous mistake. He is hardly my type. He's so far from my type, that this doesn't even qualify as a bad joke. How could I ever be attracted to a guy who does not have cat ears? Please do not mock me. This...boy...has no beauty to him. He is extremely plain and he has the face of someone who will not make much of himself in life. He is 100,000,000 light years away from my ideal. ...I will have to turn down your offer."

"How cruel...You don't have to go that far...

After that string of abuse at my expense, Kuroneko forcefully turned around.

She quickly walked off and I sighed while watching her receding back.

"...Hahh..."

She had pure white skin and black hair like a Japanese doll. She had red color contacts in her eyes and a sexy mole under the eye.

She wore a frilly gothic lolita outfit.

Her interests were cosplay, anime, video games, and making doujinshi. She seemed emotionless and unsociable. When she opened her mouth, only abuse came out. She was an annoying girl who was extremely difficult to deal with.

But...

"I will come over again sometime."

At times, she could be pretty cute.

"Sure thing," I responded in a quiet voice I wasn't sure if she could hear.

I turned back toward the house to find my little sister with her arms still folded.

She stuck out her tongue.



現在第2期が木曜日夕方5時半から放映中

Story

赤星めるは、小学4年生の女の子。ある夜、流れ星に願い事をしていためるの部屋に、小さな隕石が落ちてくる。

どっかーん、ぱりんっ! 割れた 隕石から出てきたのは、うさぎみ たいなヘンな生き物、『こめっと くん』。

こめっとくんは、なんとプリティ スターっていう異星種族の超 戦士であり、魔星物っていう悪い やつらをやっつけるために、隕石 型の宇宙船に乗って地球までや ってきたんだって。

「そうだ! めるちゃん、きみ の力を貸してっ!」 「うんっ、いいよぉ~♪」 そういうことになった。

## Character

#### ※赤星める(あかぼしめる)

小学四年生の女の子。ぼ や~んとした、お気楽で 天然な性格。こめっとく んにそそのかされて、地 球をまもる魔法少女・星く ずういっちメルルになる。\*

#### \* >1111

赤星めるが魔法で変身した姿。彼女が持つ魔法の杖『ブースターロッド』は、 斬る、刺す、ビーム等々、多数の攻撃手段を備えたオールマイティな武器。必 殺技『メテオインバクト』は、武器の特性を十全に生かした連続攻撃である。

#### \* 2めっとくか

プリティースターという種族の超 戦士。敵対種族『魔星物』が地球人 の脳髄に寄生し、戦闘準備を整え ていることを知った彼は、赤星める に協力を要請、魔法の力を授け、 即席の魔法少女に仕立て上げる。

桐乃が毎週欠かさずチェックしているTVアニメ。魔法少女メルルと、悪の魔法少女『ダークウィッチ』たちとの戦いと友情の物語。キッズ向けアニメながらバトルシーンの作画が神懸かっているのが特徴で、第1期ラストバトルはアニメファンの間で伝説となっている。"大きなお友達"の支持を集めDVDセールスも好調。

anime



### ジャンル:**ダークヒーローサスペンス**

現在第2期が木曜日夕方5時半から放映中

### STORY

1999年7月、東京上空に巨大 な幻影『闇の渦』が現れた日から、 関東圏にて奇怪な事件が多発する ようになった。

『悪魔と契約し、特殊能力に目覚 めた人間」=『ディアブロ能力者』 に、恋人を殺された来栖真夜は、 『ルシファー』と名乗る悪魔と契約 し、自らもまたディアブロ能力者・ 漆黒となる。

## Character

### ●来栖真夜(くるす・しんや)

本編の主人公。黒髪で細身、 黒い服を好んで着用。濁った 無気力な瞳が特徴。悪魔ルシ ファーと契約し、ディアブロ 能力者・漆黒となる。

### ※黒(シッコク)

来栖真夜がディアブロ能力に よって、悪魔ルシファーと融 合した姿。仮面に黒衣という 風貌、黒い九尾鞭を触手のよ うに自在に操り、黒い獣を使 い魔として召喚する。

#### ◎ 夜魔の女王(クイーン・オブ・ナイトメア)

事件の黒幕。地獄と現世を繋 ぐ門『闇の渦』を作り出した張 本人。黒いドレスを纏う妖艶 な美女。その正体は、黒猫の 形をした悪魔である。

「メルル」と同時間帯に放映されているTVアニメ。ダークな世界観と媚びな いストーリーで、女性層の支持も高い。凝りに凝った設定はときに"オサレ系 厨二病アニメ"と揶揄されることも。ちなみに黒猫のコスプレは、この作品に出てく るキャラクター、夜魔の女王(クイーン・オブ・ナイトメア)のものである。



# Chapter 2

"Halloween?"

It was afterschool on a certain Friday in the middle of October.

I was on the way back from school with Manami as usual and, also as usual, was stopping by the Tamura Shop before heading home.

The Tamura Shop was a Japanese confectionary store and Manami's home.

The two of us were walking together, headed there.

"Yes, Halloween. We're going to have a fair starting tomorrow."

As always, Manami had a slightly odd way of pronouncing some words.

She was mentally an old lady, so she had trouble with foreign words like "Halloween".

"Hehh..."

Halloween, hm?

Basically, the Tamura shop was going to have a Halloween fair like the department store in front of the station did.

"You're a Japanese confectionary store, but you're doing something for Halloween? ...I'm not sure that'll work."

"Ah, you're making fun of us. We made proper candy for Halloween and everything. I actually called you over to try it out, Kyou-chan."

"Hmm."

"Heh heh. It's pretty good, so look forward to it."

I've done it a few times already, but I guess I should introduce her. This girl with the warm, doting atmosphere is my childhood friend, Tamura Manami. She wears glasses, has a refined appearance, is neither short nor tall, and is on the higher end but not the top when it comes to academics.

Other than her slight airheaded tendencies, she is mostly normal. Her appearance and personality are the polar opposite of my little sister, so I've gotten along with her fairly well for as long as I've known her. We had

never grown apart nor progressed to a lovers' relationship. The relationship I had had with her since we were little kids had simply continued unchanged even in high school.

If anything in my plain, mediocre life was worth a special mention, it was that rare sort of relationship I had with my childhood friend.

Heh, well...My amazing little sister might also be worth mentioning.

As we chatted, the Tamura shop soon came into view.

The Tamura shop was an old, dull Japanese-style building. I had always felt it would fit right in if you placed it within Nikko Edomura.

"Oh, I see. Halloween indeed."

I stopped walking and inspected the different appearance of the shop. The shop front was decorated with plenty of jack-o'-lanterns and ghosts.

It had a contrast of black and orange. I suppose it was what you would call a blending of Japanese and Western.

The wonderful wooden sign had "Tamura Shop" skillfully carved into it. The sign seemed fitting of an old shop, but a department store-like banner hanging next to it and saying "The Tamura Shop Halloween Fair opens tomorrow!" created a very strange and surreal mismatch.

I was a bit worried, so I bluntly asked the question on my mind.

"Will customers actually come to this?"

"Th-they will...! Surely... We are having some events on the opening day."

"Like what?"

"We are calling in the neighborhood children, showing them how we make our confectionaries, and handing out candy. Also, the clerks will be dressed up as monsters."

Costumes, hm?

The word "cosplay" that I had learned the other day entered my mind, but I shook my head to get rid of it.

"You said the clerks would be dressing up, but isn't that just your mom and dad?"

The image that came to my mind was simple and pleasant, but it was just too plain. They were gathering children, so I wondered how well it would work as a sales promotion.

"No, the entire family will be helping out with the shop tomorrow. I will be dressing up, too. I will be a w-witch..."

"A witch!?" I shouted out without thinking.

After all, that was completely different from the image I had of her. If the plain, bespectacled Manami was dressed up as a witch...well, I could only imagine that she would pathetically screw up her magic a lot.

In fact, there was a similar plain, bespectacled magical girl in Stardust Witch Meruru (but she had pink hair). According to my sister: "It's so sad. Her goods are the only ones to never sell out, so they have to package them with the other regulars...Uuh..." That was exactly how I saw Manami.

As I was reminded of that, a small chuckle escaped my mouth and Manami got both embarrassed and mad.

"Come on, don't be so mean. Don't laugh like that... Y-you aren't imagining something weird, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

As she lightly smacked me with her bag, we circled around to the back door. We entered the house and headed for the living room like usual, but the air seemed to freeze the instant we slid open the door.

"Ohhh....!?"

"Fweehhh...!?"

Manami and I were frozen in place at the entrance to the living room.

This was because Manami's grandfather was collapsed on the tatami mat floor.

"Grandpa!"

Manami's cry brought me back to my senses and I frantically ran over.

Shit! What am I supposed to do...!?

At a loss, I tried to call out to him.

"Gramps, are you okay!? Hey!"

He gave no response and his skin was extremely cold to the touch.

A chill ran down my back. I hesitated for a second and then I tried to find his pulse despite only vaguely remembering how.

...I can't really tell. At the very least, I'm not feeling the pulsation that I normally feel when I check my own pulse.

His body was completely limp, so he felt heavy despite being nothing but skin and bones.

"M-Manami, call an ambulance! Hurry!"

"O-okay! I-I will...!"

Manami was so frantic as she ran off that she almost tripped.

I can't believe a friendly visit has turned into this...

As I became aware of how fragile a thing "everyday life" was, I propped the old man up in my arms. As I did, a pathetic "oof" escaped my mouth.

I could now see his face. His skin was deathly pale and his eyes were open wide.

"...Gramps..."

Grief won out over fear and tears appeared in my eyes. I felt a presence behind me and found Manami's grandmother there when I turned around.

"Oh, Kyou-chan. Welcome," she said with a soft smile that was so similar to Manami's.

"Granny...! Gramps is...!" I shouted out half in tears.

She looked over his body and said, "Oh, dear."

O-oh, dear? Wh-what kind of weak reaction is that!? Does she not understand the gravity of the situation!?

"He's pretending to be dead, isn't he?"

"Ehhhhhh!?"

My eyes opened wide and my gaze quickly shot back and forth between gramps's corpse and her.

Pretending to be dead...? But...he's completely dead here.

"Really? B-but his body is so cold."

"Yes. He was just sitting naked in the store's refrigerator, so I thought he had finally lost it...Sigh. But it seems it was just to pull off this prank. What a troublesome old man."

She never lost her smile, but I was still not convinced.

"B-but he has no pulse!"

"His pulse has always been weak."

"B-but! Then what is this corpse-like smell...?"

"That is simply the scent of the elderly. Kyou-chan, try to think back. He has always smelled like that."

"...You're right!! But still..."

Granny must have realized I wasn't convinced because she put a hand to her cheek with a troubled expression.

"In that case, I will give you some proof," she said before bringing her mouth to the old man's ear.

"Gramps, gramps, if you don't get up soon, I will pull out your hairs one at a time."

"Ooohhhh!"

"Waaaaahhhhh!"

Our reactions were truly dramatic. Gramps jumped up as if he really had come back from the dead and I cried out in fright as the corpse I was holding suddenly sprang to life.

"You monstrous old hag! How dare you mess with my few remaining hairs!" gramps shouted, eyes wide.

H-he really was alive...

I'm the one that should be complaining here, old man! I thought I was going to have a heart attack!

Without listening to a word gramps had to say, granny looked at me and winked as if to say, "See?"

Gramps then spun around to face me with his eyes still wide in the same expression. Needless to say, it gave me yet another fright.

He raised a life-filled hand and said, "Happy Halloween, Kyou-chan! Trick or...what was it?"

"Don't ask me! Has your brain started to rot, old man!?"

Before I knew it, I had shouted back without restraint.

"Th-thank goodness...grandpa is okay..."

After she returned to the living room, Manami was so relieved that she repeated that same statement a few times.

Afterwards, I had chased after her to stop her from calling an ambulance and to explain what had actually happened.

This was after we had returned to the living room from there.

"Ha ha, sorry about that. I guess your grandfather was a little too convincing♡ Teh heh!" said gramps while sticking out his tongue.

Believe me when I say it was difficult to resist punching him.

Don't make your granddaughter cry.

"So gramps... Why were you pretending to be dead?"

"Eh? Oh, I was practicing my Halloween costume for tomorrow. Heh heh. I make a pretty amazing zombie, don't I?"

"Amazing? That was nothing to joke about."

If you make such a realistic corpse in the shop, one of the customers is definitely going to call the cops and an ambulance! And you'll be coming back to life afterwards, right? The shock would kill the kids you called over.

Also, a zombie is a bad idea for a store that sells food.

"At the very least, I think it would be a bad idea to use that as a performance for the store," I warned.

"...Mh, really?"

Gramps looked utterly disappointed. He glanced over at granny with a look that seemed to say, "What do you think?" She merely said, "Kyou-chan is exactly right," and he looked downhearted.

He finally rolled over into the corner of the room and said, "Oh, I see. Fine then. Hmph, I guess I'm just..."

The old man was pouting like a child.

Granny chuckled and said, "Kyou-chan, don't try to console him, okay? If you act too concerned, he tends to get carried away."

"Roger that."

Granny was normally incredibly kind, but she was quite harsh when it came to gramps.

"A-ah ha ha..." Manami laughed awkwardly as she watched the exchange between her grandparents, but then she stood up as if she had suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, right. Kyou-chan, I am going to go ahead and bring in the Halloween candy, okay?"

"Sure."

"Hee hee. I will lend you a hand with that."

When gramps saw Manami and her grandmother had left the room, he slowly sat up and spoke to me reproachfully.

"Heh! You sure are popular with the old ladies, Kyou-chan!"

"That doesn't make me happy!"

"Ka ka ka!"

Gramps was a fun old man to be around. I had known him since I was a little kid and I liked him almost more as a friend than anything else.

I hoped he and granny would never die.

Meanwhile, someone else entered the room.

"Oh! It's An-chan!"

"Yup, here I am."

I raised one hand in greeting to Manami's little brother, "Rock".

Rock was an embarrassing nickname he had gotten carried away and given himself a while back and it was also his soul name.

I'd been calling him that for about 2 months at that point, so it had just kind of stuck. If the same thing had happened at his school, I kind of feel sorry for him though.

"...Um...well...Keep up the fight, I guess."

"You're sympathizing with me the second we meet!? Well, okay! I don't really understand, but I will!"

He had a buzz cut, he was rather short, and he always talked in a ridiculously loud voice that made it sound like he was using a megaphone.

I had always liked how he referred to me as An-chan and...well...he was kind of like a little brother to me.

"By the way, what do you have there?"

I pointed toward the instrument Rock was carrying. I actually knew quite well "what" it was. My question was more about "why" he had it.

"This? Heh hehh... I'm gonna give a performance for the events tomorrow! I guess you could say I'm in charge of the music. Basically, I'm gonna get everyone fired up for Halloween with my live performance! I'll be all like, 'Listen to the sound of my soul!' Hah hah! Pretty badass, right?"

Rock strummed the instrument he was holding.

Leaving aside the issue of whether "Listen to the sound of my soul!" would ever be "badass", a certain question had been stuck in my head ever since he had entered the room.

"But isn't that a shamisen you're holding?"

"Heh. That's An-chan for you. You always attack straight to the heart of the issue." With a distant look in his eyes, Rock let out a heavy

self-deprecating breath. He then continued speaking while half in tears. "I'll be honest with you, An-chan. I have no money, so I can't buy a guitar! That's why I bowed down and asked dad to buy me an instrument, any instrument! He said granny played the shamisen, so I should ask her to teach me."

So that's how this came to be. That certainly is a middle schooler-esque reason. But what was his dad thinking? Even if he asked for any instrument at all, a shamisen is a bit out there.

Actually, Rock is quite something himself for agreeing to actually learn how to play the shamisen. I suppose this is a case of like father like son. In fact, does anyone live here who isn't an airhead?

With a huge grin on my face, I asked, "Well? Can you play it? Let me hear."

"Sure thing! Prepare to be surprised!"

Rock held up the shamisen with such speed that I could almost hear the "shakin" sound effect. He must have been practicing. The pose he took wasn't bad. It actually looked like something a real guitarist would use.

With a tense expression, Rock proceeded to play the shamisen. It was a truly surreal sight.

O-oh, wow. He's playing a legit song!

I knew nothing about shamisen music, but I could tell he was intentionally making the tune I could hear rather than simply randomly playing.

It was a kind, melancholic song that made me feel homesick and was somehow reminiscent of the Heian era.

I almost thought I could hear the sound of a flute coming from somewhere.

It was certainly a fitting sound for a Japanese confectionary shop.

However, it was not Halloween-like in the slightest.

"Heh. Whaddya think, An-chan!? I'm like John Frusciante, aren't I?"

"You're like a lute priest."

"Wha-!? That's the same thing gramps said! That really hurts!"

No way! I made the same joke as gramps? That really hurts.

He may have been playing the shamisen, but I could only see him as the Marukome Boy.

"Chehh. You old people with your old tastes just don't understand my youthful soul!"

Rock resumed his refined performance.

"Sorry about the wait~."

With that relaxed announcement, Manami and granny returned.

They were carrying trays of candy and tea.

The living room now contained, Manami, gramps, granny, Rock, and me.

By the way, whenever I came over, that was usually the group I would usually drink tea with, eat snacks with, and chat with.

Manami and granny lined up the contents of the trays on the tea table.

I looked down to inspect the Halloween candies.

"Oh. These are pretty elaborate."

"Eh heh heh. Aren't they?" said Manami with a soft smile and I nodded in response.

There were a few different kinds of candy lined up on the tea table, but all of them were Halloween-themed Japanese confectionaries. One of them was a bite sized jack-o'-lantern, but it was actually the type of Japanese confectionary made of red bean paste and colored with nerikiri-an. I don't know what that type is called, but I'm betting everyone has had one at some point or another. A skilled confectionary artisan can make anything out of nerikiri-an, so it is often used for decorative confectionaries. By the way, I can tell you from experience that they are incredibly hard to make. Shaping them with a spatula and mold is hard enough, but just making the nerikiri-an itself is hard for an amateur. I may only be at the apprentice level, but I don't think it would be exaggerating to say that's a secret technique of the trade.

Oh, looks like I got a little too worked up in my commentary there. Heh, I guess I can't complain when Kirino does the same.

"H-here, Kyou-chan. Will you try one?"

"Sure. Here goes..."

I grabbed one of the nerikiri jack-o'-lanterns and tossed it into my mouth.

"It's good!"

"Really!?"

Manami's face lit up and she brought her hands together in front of her chest.

I took a sip of tea and said, "Really, really! And there's actual pumpkin in this! Now that's attention to detail! And what are these? Seeds?"

"Yes...They're pumpkin seeds."

"Oh, so the decorations on the head were the seeds. Wow."

I was truly impressed.

Also, each jack-o'-lantern had a different expression. That gave them a real handmade feel to them. Other than the jack-o'-lanterns, there were ghosts, witches, bats, black cats, and other Halloween-themed shapes of various colors.

These are all so small and cute. I bet they'll be received well by the mainly young and female customers of the Tamura Shop. Not only are they intricately decorated, but thought has clearly been put into them.

I looked over at Manami and asked, "Did you make these?"

"E-eh? What makes you think that?"

Well, because you've been doing nothing but ask me for my thoughts on them...

The first thing you did was ask me to try one and you were so happy when I said it was good. Anyone would be able to tell with that loose expression on your face.

Manami embarrassedly fidgeted for a bit, but finally nodded.

"...Yes. I made them. I'm glad you like them."

"...Sure."

Things had gotten oddly awkward, so I started fidgeting too. If Kirino had seen me, I'm sure she would have called me disgusting, but whatever.

While watching us and biting into a dorayaki filled with pumpkin and red bean paste, gramps spoke up.

"You two need to hurry up and get married."

"Cough...!?"

I almost spat out my tea.

"G-grandpa!" shouted Manami in a rare instance of raising her voice, but everyone else was not phased in the slightest.

"They are rare, but that old man sometimes has some good ideas," said granny with a warm smile as she sipped her tea.

It could get a bit troublesome at times, but those two were always trying to get Manami and me together. It had been going on for years, so we were rarely phased by it anymore, but a surprise attack could still get through.

Honestly... I hate this kind of atmosphere...

Manami seemed to be thinking pretty much the same thing, so she decided to leave the living room.

"I've had enough of you two! Ky-Kyou-chan, let's go to my room."

"O-okay," I replied and stood up.

Gramps happily cheered us on with whistles as I left and followed Manami to her room.

We headed down the hallway a bit and walked up a narrow and steep staircase. I was rather fond of how the staircase creaked with each step. I don't know why, but the sound had always had an odd calming effect on me.

The sliding door right at the top of the stairs led to Manami's room.

"W-wait here a second..."

"Sure."

Manami slid the door open a crack and slipped inside.

She must have been cleaning up her room a bit. Putting away porn magazines...would be what I would do in that situation. Manami must have had her own things she didn't want me to see.

She isn't hiding something truly shocking like Kirino, is she? ... Nah.

Come to think of it, it's been quite a while since I've been in her room.

That said, my heart wasn't racing or anything.

After a short bit, the door slid open again and Manami stuck out her head.

"C-come in."

I then set foot in Manami's room.

The room's floor was made up of six tatami mats and it smelled of soft rush and incense. Both the room and the hallway had a large window, so plenty of sun entered the room. The amount of sunlight was almost dazzling and it seemed to warm me, body and soul.

Despite both being girl's rooms, this one had a completely different feel to it than my little sister's. If you imagine an old lady's room, you should get a surprisingly accurate idea of what the room was like.

It had little furniture, making it basically empty. It had a few dressers, a three-sided mirror, and a tea table, but that was really it. Stuffed animals and colorful cushions were lined up in one corner of the room as if they were a last minute addition to make the room seem like a girl's room.

However, the jars of unknown use, the hanging scroll-style calendar, and what looked like a framed ukiyoe print gave a much stronger impression of an old lady's room.

"Doesn't seem like it's changed much."

"Don't look around like that... It's embarrassing."

What's so embarrassing about those pots or that hanging scroll?

I'll never understand girls...

I sat down in a random spot, stretched out my legs, and got relaxed.

Manami sat down about two fist-lengths away from me.

"U-um, what should we do?" she asked in an oddly hurried tone of voice.

"Since we're in a bedroom, I know what I want to do." "Ehh!?" Manami seemed utterly shocked. "Y-you mean...!?" What's she so shocked about? "I've been staying up late recently, so...yawn...I just want to lie down and get some rest. And I figure this is the perfect opportunity." "O-oh..." Manami seemed to have mistaken my meaning somehow, but she sighed in relief once she realized what I had meant. What did she think I meant? I just don't understand her sometimes... I flipped over onto my back and said, "By the way, we left our textbooks at school, so no studying." "I wasn't saying we should..." After staring at me for a bit, a small laugh escaped Manami's mouth. "Yes...let's just relax." "...Now we're talking." And so, we relaxed. I don't know about other people, but for us relaxing was just lazing around doing nothing. "Oh, right. Do you want some tea?" "Nn..." We drank some tea. " ...." " " We just sat around. "...Fwah." We yawned.

"Yes, but we won't start until after the shop closes."

"Come to think of it, don't you have to prepare for Halloween?"

"Hmm"

"The whole family is going to work hard tonight."

"Then I'll help out."

"Really? There is a lot of manual labor involved, so that would be a lot of help. Grandpa's back has been hurting him lately, so he has been having some trouble. ...But are you sure you are up to it? Aren't you tired?"

"I said, I'd do it, so don't try to talk me out of it."

"Thanks. It isn't much, but we'll feed you dinner in exchange."

We chatted.

While we did nothing in particular, time naturally passed.

" ....."

We would be preparing for college entrance exams the next year, so you could certainly say we were wasting our time. However, I've always felt that wasting one's time like that is important. My view of life is that excess like that has value.

As I thought about that, I realized that way of thinking may have been why I felt so much sympathy toward the otaku lifestyle.

Pursuing video games, manga, or anime would do nothing to aid society. Those were nothing but unproductive hobbies that did nothing but idly eat away all of your precious time.

However, that was exactly why those things had an unquantifiable value and why so many people grew so obsessed with them. That kind of pointless time was not something to be mocked.

"Kyou-chan, what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing really."

"Hmm..."

Manami sipped her tea while loosely sitting in the seiza style.

I looked over at her face for no particular reason.

"Ah, the tea stem is standing up."

"That's amazing."

Yes.

It was not something to be mocked.

A few hours later, Rock and I were helping clean up the shop and set it up for the following day while the women of the Tamura family prepared dinner. After finishing the cleaning, only one job remained.

"Kwoh! Damn, this is heavy...!"

We had to carry bags of ingredients from the back of a truck to the separate refrigerated room out behind the store.

I'm sure anyone who has ever worked at a Japanese confectionary shop would know, but those business-size bags are all extremely heavy.

... My arms are gonna be sore tomorrow.

Manami's father had gladly accepted my offer to help. In fact, his face had lit up when he saw me, so I'm betting he would have had me help even if I hadn't offered. In all the time I'd known him, he had never hesitated to have me work. However, I didn't mind. After all, that way I didn't feel so bad about everything they did for me.

"Last one...hoo..."

I wiped the sweat from my face with the towel hanging around my neck and my heavy breathing was visible in the cold refrigerated room.

When I exited back into the yard, Manami was waiting for me, wearing an apron.

"Thanks for the hard work, Kyou-chan."

"No problem...but man am I ever tired."

"Ah ha ha," Manami laughed. "Kyou-chan, you really helped out a lot today. Thank you so much. I worked hard on dinner, so make sure to eat a lot."

"You can count on it."

"Do you want to eat first? Or would you rather take a bath first?"

"Since you worked so hard on the food, I'll eat first. Wait...what do you mean take a bath?"

"Um...dad and the others said you might as well spend the night. ...I-it was dad who said it, not me!"

"You don't need to repeat that. I heard you the first time."

She isn't as bad as Kirino, but she does act weirdly every once in a while...

It took me no time at all to decide what to do.

"I guess I'll spend the night then."

"Eh? R-really?"

"Well, yeah. I'll just call my parents. We don't have school tomorrow, so there shouldn't be a problem."

She had been the one to bring it up, but a magnificent smile stretched across Manami's face when I readily agreed. Her expression softened so much I'm not quite sure how to describe it.

"Heh heh...I'm glad. It really has been a while since you spent the night, Kyou-chan."

"You're right. It has. We used to spend the night at each other's houses all the time, but at some point we stopped. I wonder why."

"Eh? It was because...actually, I'm not sure either."

We looked at each other for a bit. I thought about it, but I simply couldn't come up with an answer.

I guess it's just one of those things with no clear answer. Changes in relationships are often that way.

"Hmm. Could it be that as a high school boy, you are too nervous to spend the night at a girl's house?"

She sounded exactly like some old lady. There wasn't the slightest hint of youth in the words she chose.

"Why would I feel nervous about spending the night at your place?"

"Eh? You don't?"

"Nope."

Why does she look a bit disappointed?

"In fact, I feel more relaxed here than at home."

Because my little sister isn't here.

Hearing that, Manami's disappointed expression completely reversed itself.

"I see," she said with a smile.

"What? Is there something you want to say?"

"No. I was just thinking that that way is better."

As was often the case, I did not quite understand what my childhood friend meant.

As Manami and I headed for the living room, we ran across gramps in the hallway after he had just gotten out of the bath.

"Thanks for the hard work! As a reward, I grant you the right to take a bath with Manami!"

You shut up. And don't hang around your granddaughter while wearing nothing but a towel.

"S-sorry, Kyou-chan... Why does everyone have to say things like that...?"

"Don't worry about it. It's nothing new, so I don't really mind anymore."

For some reason, my attempt to brush that topic aside seemed to slightly annoy Manami.

"Oh, I see. So you don't mind at all," she said while pouting.

At any rate, dinner ended without incident.

Everyone was resting after the meal in their own way.

A variety show was playing on the TV and Rock would laugh uproariously at every joke the comedian made. It didn't take much to make him laugh.

If everyone was like that, being a comedian would be a piece of cake.

As I tried to watch from next to him, I wanted to smack him on the back of the head and tell him to shut up.

However, I couldn't hear the TV because of Rock, so I lost interest. That was when I felt a gaze from the other side.

"2"

I turned around and my eyes met with Manami's as she had been looking at me.

We were looking at each other with the table between us.

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"...Jiii~."
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While uttering the onomatopoeia, Manami stared at me, looking like she wanted to say something.

"...Wh-what?" I asked while flinching a bit.

But Manami merely continued wordlessly staring at me as if to say, "You know what."

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"...Jiii~."
"..."
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It was like we were in a staring contest. The first to look away would lose.

However, I had never won that kind of contest.

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".....Kh."
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In no time at all, I was unable to endure and averted my gaze. And so I lost.

I had known it from the beginning, but she wanted me to tell her something.

Umm...you liked it when I complimented the Halloween candies you made earlier, so you want me to do that again, don't you?

"Oh, by the way...That food was good."

"Eh heh heh. Thanks. I'm glad."

Despite being the one that made me say it, Manami's eyes narrowed happily behind her glasses.

For me, nothing was more embarrassing. And what annoyed me was that Manami seemed to love embarrassing me like that so much she couldn't help herself.

But I enjoyed troubling Manami so much I couldn't help myself, so I guess I'm not really one to talk.

"B-by the way, do you think your dad's about done with his bath?"

"Hm, probably."

I changed the subject and Manami looked up at the clock and brought her finger up to her lips.

As always, she was seated in a perfect seiza style. It was lovely enough to mesmerize you.

Her looks were average, but that aspect of her was most desirable.

"Do you want to go next?" she asked.

"I'm fine going last."

I'd feel bad going before the people who actually live here.



"I don't mind going after you, Kyou-chan," said Manami, encouraging me to go take a bath.

"No, you go first."

"Don't hold back now, Kyou-chan. Go on ahead. Go on."

After we repeated essentially the same exchange a few times, Manami suddenly seemed to realize something.

She clapped her hands together lightly and said, "Then how about this?"

"...Wh-what?"

Minami leaned over, bringing her face in close. With a mischievous expression, she whispered into my ear.

"How about we take a bath together after all?"

"...!?"

I knew she was just kidding and it was a scheme meant to get me embarrassed, but I hate to admit it still shook me to my core.

"Gnn..."

I started biting my lower lip as my heart raced when suddenly Rock turned around from where he lay watching the comedy act on the TV. He still had a grin on his face from laughing at the jokes.

"Hey, hey. What are you two whispering about?"

"Shut up! Just turn around and watch the TV!"

"Ah ha ha. Kyou-chan, you're blushing."

"Kh...!"

I can't believe this. Dammit, Manami. You've gone too far...

She had an odd way of being much more strong and confident when at home than when she was elsewhere.

Keh! Your future husband is only going to learn about this after he marries you and be stuck having you attacking him with embarrassing words day in and day out. He'll probably end up dying of embarrassment.

Hah, but don't think I'm the same person I used to be, Manami. Over the past few months, I caught a nasty disease from my little sister and her friends. You haven't seen the ultimate power I possess when driven into a corner! Now, listen to this!

"Okay, c'mon, Manami. Let's go take that bath!"

"H-hweehhh!?"

The way that triumphant look melted from Manami's reddening face in an instant made my desperate counterattack well worth it.

"A-are you serious?"

"Completely serious! You're the one that talked me into it, so I won't let you back out now!" I announced as I forcefully stood up and clenched my fist.

Seeing that, Rock got worked up too.

"Ohh! Hell yeah, An-chan! That's why you're a true man!"

Yes, yes. I knew you'd understand. After all, you're an idiot.

Having become a man among men, I grabbed towels and changes of clothes for the two of us.

"C'mon, Manami! Let's go! It's time for our bath! I'll show you my Hyper Weapon!"

My inability to stop once I work up some momentum is one of my most severe personality flaws.

"Wah wah..."

Manami's eyes were opened wide, her face was beet red, and she was shaking her hands around.

Hah, that's what you get. I hope you learned your lesson.

However, I may have overdone it. I started to get a bit embarrassed and red in the face myself, so I was considering going ahead and telling her I was just kidding.

However, Manami's lips stopped twitching and started moving with clear intent.

"G-grandma! What do I do!? Kyou-chan wants to take a bath with me!"

"Don't go tell your grandmother!"

When I came back to my senses, I thought I was going to die, but I ended up taking my bath after Manami's dad. And just to be clear, I took this bath alone.

The Tamura family bath was a completely normal bath with a bathtub and an area to wash in.

The bathtub had calamus floating in it. The calamus festival had long since passed, but the Tamura family had a habit of putting all sorts of things in the bathtub as additives to the bathwater.

As such, you naturally learned about that kind of thing by living in that house.

Simply put, the bathtub was filled with calamus water. By putting expensive calamus root in the water, it was supposed to help with back pain and nerve pain.

I was a bit young to need that kind of thing, but I have to admit it smelled so good it felt like the aroma itself was healing my body.

That mix of a refreshing fragrance and the hazy steam was not bad at all.

It may have been a cramped household bath, but it had a nice atmosphere to it.

I started by washing my hair and body and then washed the bubbles off in the shower.

Only then did I finally stick one foot into the calamus water.

"Hot!"

Oh, that's right. I forgot.

This family always turns their bathtub into a pot of boiling water. What is wrong with old-fashioned people...?

I may have been silently cursing them, but I was still hesitant to cool the bath off with some cooler water because of Manami and the other old lady who had to take a bath afterwards.

Fine then. I guess I just have to bear with it.

"Hoooottt!"

I plunged shoulder deep into the water with my eyes clenched shut. As the burning feeling on my skin slowly abated, it turned into a nice feeling.

"Haahhh..."

My body was heated to the core. I did enjoy lazing around in a warm bath, but a truly hot bath wasn't bad either. I rested the back of my head on the edge of the bathtub and sighed.

"Now then. What am I going to do about tomorrow?"

Manami had said she was going to help with the Halloween event, so I decided to help too.

I kind of wanted to see it through to the end.

I was looking forward to see what kind of plain witch she would make.

Also, I didn't really mind helping out with the store. Hard, sweaty work like that just seemed to suit me. Taking a hot bath like this after finishing that hard work gave me an irreplaceable feeling of satisfaction. ...Heh, sorry I'm such a normal guy.

Well, it looks like this weekend isn't going to be too bad.

"I won't have to see a certain annoying someone's face even once."

A smile naturally leaked out onto my face.

As I continued to pleasantly soak in the bath, I suddenly heard the sound of rustling clothes.

Hm? Is someone in the changing room?

I could see a silhouette through the steam and the frosted glass. Whoever it was seemed to be stripping.

.....Eh? Wha-? Ehhh?

"Wait! D-don't tell me she's actually doing it!"

I started trembling as I stared at the door to the changing room.

Is she an idiot!? Did she actually take that joke seriously!?

Waahh!! What do I do!? I-if this was an eroge, there'd definitely be an event CG here!

I tightly grabbed onto the edge of the bathtub. After all, I wasn't getting excited at the possibility or anything.

A-anyway, I need to put a towel on!

Just as I began to take action, the door to the changing room slid open.

"Yo! I'll wash your back, An-chan!"

"You!?"

I threw the wash basin at the intruder and scored a direct hit on the Marukome Boy.

"Owww!"

Needless to say, it was Rock that took a wash basin to the face.

Hah. Of course it's him. I had a feeling it was going to end this way!

"...Screw you! D-do you...Do you know what you've done!?" I yelled at him.

"A-An-chan, why are you pissed and half in tears!?"

Don't ask me!

After getting out of the bath, I lazed about in the living room for a while longer. After a bit, granny approached me.

"Kyou-chan, I've laid out your futon in the usual room."

"Oh, thanks."

The "usual room" was the room I had always used when I had slept over in the past. They had excellent hospitality. If she had just left the futon out, I could have laid it out myself.

Both of my own grandmothers had passed away, so that kindness left me with an odd, warm feeling.

"Hmm, is it really that late already?"

I looked up at the clock and discovered that it was almost 10. The Tamura family tended to go to bed early in the first place and they also had the event at the store the next day. I decided it was about time I headed back to my room.

"I guess I'll be heading to bed," I said.

"Oh, then I will get back to my room, too," said Manami, standing up along with me.

By the way, we were both wearing pajamas. (I was told the ones I was wearing belonged to her father.) Manami had only just gotten out of the bath, so she was not wearing her glasses and her hair was a bit wet.

"Eh heh heh. How long has it been since we were together right before going to bed?"

"Hmm. About four years I think," I replied as we walked down the hall.

Manami headed up the stairs and I followed.

"You look a little unsteady? Are you okay?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm fine. I'm just not wearing my glasses because I just got out of the bath."

"Oh, I see."

She didn't look fine, so I kept myself ready to support her if she fell. However, we made it to the second floor without incident.

The sliding door right in front of us was Manami's room. My room was the third door.

"Well, good night."

"Yeah, good night."

I watched Manami enter her room and then slid open the door to my room.

"Geh..."

My breath immediately caught in my throat. The futon granny had laid out was there. However, there was another one.

Two futons were laid out right next to each other. Basically, it was what is known as a couple's futon.

Wh-what the hell is this!?

"What's wrong?"

"Fh!?"

I spun around to find Manami right behind me.

"Wh-why are you here!?"

"Y-you don't have to get that surprised... For some reason my futon was missing and I saw you still standing out here when I came out into the hall to figure out where it went. ...Um, is there something in there?"

"Don't look! Don't look in this room!"

My cries of protest were too late because Manami had already peered past me and into the room.

"...Ehhhhh!?"

Her body stiffened and she pointed at the pair of futons while violently trembling.

"What is that!? Th-that is my futon...isn't it!?"

"...I'm afraid so," I said with a solemn nod.

"Did you lay it out, Kyou-chan!? So that you could sleep next to me!?"

"N-n-n-noo!? What are you saying!? D-don't be silly! Why would I do that!? Make no mistake about this!"

We were so agitated, that we couldn't string together our thoughts properly. We even forgot what had happened just a few minutes ago.

"B-but, but! They're so close together! It's like the futons of newlyweds!"

"C-calm down! W-w-we need to calm down and think about this rationally! Yes, yes. After careful thought, this could only have been my doing!"

"Kyou-chan, calm down! You aren't making any sense!"

"Kh...! I never thought the day would come when you would be able to call me out on that...!"

At any rate, I didn't even need to calm down to realize that it had to have been granny who had laid them out like that.

...That damn old woman. How could she have such a kind expression while telling me she laid out the futons like this!

"...Sigh. Well, let's move your futon back."

"Eh? You're moving it back?"

"Of course I am! Why do you look so surprised!?"

"Well, actually...I'd be fine...with leaving it like this..."

"I'm moving it back."

Ignoring Manami's ominous statement, I started to pick up her futon.

Suddenly, I started hearing pained cries of "Gfoh...!" from behind me.

"Wh-what!?"

I spun around to find gramps crouching in the hallway and holding his heart.

"Th-the futon...The futon..." he was muttering.

Manami frantically ran over to him.

"Grandpa! Are you okay!?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine. No need to worry. When I saw Kyou-chan about to pick up that futon, my trauma from the war kicked in and I almost had a heart attack. That's all."

"...."

What kind of overly specific cause is that? And since when did something happen to you in the war?

And you were hiding and watching us this whole time, weren't you, old man? You wouldn't have been able to appear with such perfect timing otherwise.

So you're in on this, too.

With an exaggerated expression, gramps said, "If you don't leave those futons laid out there, the pumpkin's curse will kill me."

Quit making shit up...

I glared at gramps with narrowed eyes and tried picking the futon up again.

"Ugh!? Gyoeehhhhhhh!?"

. . . . . . .

I put the futon back down.

Panting heavily, gramps said, "Th-that was a close one. I almost died. I saw granny waving me over from the other side of the Sanzu River."

"Granny is watching TV downstairs."

Could it be any more obvious it's an act?

I could feel the blood vessels in my temple throbbing as I tried picking up the futon once more. When I did, gramps immediately grabbed at his heart.

"Gwaaaaaaaahhhh! Fohhhhhhhh!?"

"Daaahhhhhhhhhhhh! Fine! I get it, so just give it a rest already!"

"Cough cough...Really?"

Don't look up at me with those puppy-dog eyes, old man. Nothing pisses me off more than when you use the exact same mannerisms as Manami!

I was so overwhelmed, I could only nod. He was clearly only acting, but it looked like an old man like him would actually die if he put on that act much longer.

"Yes, yes. We just have to sleep here, right? It's not like it's that big a deal. ...Right?"

When I looked to Manami for agreement, she gave a gentle smile in return.

"Yes, I am fine with it. As long as you are too, Kyou-chan."

That reaction kind of does make it seem like this is no big deal.

Well, I knew you'd give that kind of answer.

But Manami, if you acted that defenseless around any other guy, they'd definitely mistake it for something else.

And so, Manami and I ended up sleeping next to each other in the same room.

Of course, we pulled the futons apart so it wasn't a couple's futon.

"This sort of reminds me of when we were kids," she said.

"Come to think of it, we did sleep next to each other like this when you would sleep over at my place."

"Yes. I never thought we would sleep in the same room at this age, though."

We rolled over so we were facing each other and exchanged bitter smiles.

If we gave granny the benefit of the doubt, it was possible she had laid out the futons as normal.

However, that old man was clearly guilty either way.

Well, it really wasn't a big deal. It would have been a huge problem with any other girl, but luckily, this was Manami. She was like family to me, so I didn't need to be nervous or think about it too much. Yes, I'm serious.

"We should probably just get to sleep. Good night."

"Nn...Good night, Kyou-chan."

I turned out the lights and shut my eyes. In the silence, all I could hear was the regular ticking of the clock.

A minute passed. Then ten. No, it was probably more than that. Anyway, once I had lost track of how long it had been, I heard a voice.

"Kyou-chan, are you still awake?" whispered Manami.

"...Yeah," I responded.

Silence continued for a short bit.

"Um...I hope we can go to the same college."

C'mon, why do you have to bring that up now? Ha ha.

I almost said that out loud, but I managed to restrain myself.

"So do I," I replied.

I felt there was no need or reason to talk about that then.

And that's why I continued with the pointless talk.

"If we do go to the same college after we graduate from high school...what do you think things will be like?"

It was a very vague question. However, it was something I had thought about constantly.

I didn't really want an answer. It was just a question I felt had no particular meaning.

"Hmm," Manami thought about it for a bit. "I think things will stay pretty much the same."

Her response could be said to be arbitrary, vague, and overly carefree, but that was what made it a very Manami-like answer.

It was most likely exactly the kind of answer I had wanted.

"Maybe so."

When I thought about it, I really did think she might be right. By graduating from high school and entering college, a lot of things would change. However, plenty of things would remain exactly the same.

"Hah. I get the feeling you'll say the exact same thing when we graduate from college."

A slight laugh escaped my mouth. I glanced over and saw Manami blinking in surprise, but she finally smiled back at me.

"Yes...you're probably right. ... Maybe I'll never stop saying that."

Whatever kind of future she was imagining, it made her tone very soft.

For some reason, her words left a strong impression with me. They sounded quite reassuring.

. . . . . . . . . .

We fell silent once more. After a bit, Manami broke the comfortable silence.

"We used to go to each other's houses and spend the night all the time as kids, didn't we?"

"...?"

Didn't we just have this conversation earlier?

"But lately we haven't at all, so...um..."

What is she having so much difficulty saying?

After searching for the right thing to say for a bit, Manami finally just said, "Sorry. It's nothing."

She then pulled her blanket up so it covered her mouth.

While watching her, I said, "Then do you want to come over to my place next time?"

I had recalled that it had been a few years since Manami had been to my house.

Girls had a way of not saying anything even when they wanted something. I had learned that firsthand recently thanks to a certain someone.

That was why I uttered that one phrase I had been unable to say before.

When she heard my question, Manami's eyes opened wide in surprise and she blinked repeatedly. With her mouth still hidden behind the blanket, she nodded.

"Um...Yes. I'd like that."

Her expression was mostly hidden behind the futon, but her gently narrowed eyes were enough for me.

I had only been able to draw out that happy expression from my shy childhood friend thanks to that certain someone I mentioned before. On that point alone, I was thankful.

"Okay, then let's do that at some point."

And that relaxed night continued on.

By the way, let me be very clear about one thing. We may have slept next to each other like that, but nothing like what you're hoping for happened. Sorry about that.



## Chapter 3

It was December 24th. The night when intimate lovers whispered their love to each other. Christmas Eve.

On that night, I visited a love hotel with my little sister.

"Okay, I'm going to go take a shower. ...Don't you dare peek."

"Why would I peek? Just hurry it up."

"Hmph," Kirino snorted before disappearing into the shower room.

"Hmph," I snorted in return before sitting down on the double bed.

"...Sigh..."

With that rough sigh, I looked around the room restlessly.

Over half of the small room's area was taken up by the large double bed.

The ceiling light was on, but the room was still dim.

"..."

I hit the switch on the bedside table and a light directly above the bed turned on, brightening the area a bit more. However, it was still not completely bright.

I could hear the sound of running water and smell the scent of soap floating in from the shower.

Kirino didn't seem to have noticed, but the silhouette of the girl taking a shower was vaguely visible through the frosted glass. Both the dim lighting and the frosted glass were meant to add to the obscene atmosphere of the place.

"..."

The instant I realized the secret of the frosted glass, I quickly averted my gaze.

Against my wishes, my legs stared fidgeting restlessly.

"......What am I so nervous about?"

This is bad. This is really bad. C'mon, Kyousuke, calm down. This is your little sister, remember?

"I know...I know, but..."

The fidgeting of my legs worsened and I could feel a heat rising in my face.

I was unable to withstand idly sitting there, so I searched for something to draw my attention.

I found a TV remote on the bedside table. I hit the power button and the LCD TV in one corner of the room turned on.

However...

"Oh, shit...!"

I quickly turned the TV back off.

Why is it showing a porn video!?

I frantically looked over toward the shower room, but luckily Kirino did not seem to have heard.

I held my hand up to my chest as I sighed in relief.

If she had thought I was watching porn while she was taking a shower, who knows what she would have said to me. That was a close one.

But come to think of it, this is a hotel for doing that kind of thing, isn't it?

And for some reason, I was there with my little sister.

"Ahhhh! What am I supposed to do...?"

I scratched at my chest as I cried out in anguish. My heart was pounding.

I can't believe I have to be somewhere like this with my sister...

The sound of the shower continued and steam floated into the room. There was also the sweet smell of soap.

"..........How did things end up like this?"

To explain that, we have to go a good bit back in time.

It happened just after December began.

As before, I was being forced to play against my sister in a computer game while in her room.

It was a 3D fighting game called "True Little Sister Great Massacre Siscalypse". Kirino and I were using different computers to play the game. Kirino was on her desktop while I was using her laptop. We were facing each other online. This meant there was no real reason for me to be in her room, but...

"You aren't allowed to take the laptop out of my room because you would just search for porn sites."

Saying that, she gave me no choice in the matter. If only she would forget about that already. Well, anyway, while we were playing, she suddenly spoke up.

"Y'know...I have another one," Kirino said while sending a chain of attacks down on me from the sky. The character Kirino was using (a magical girl little sister) fired countless rings of light that temporarily bound my character so it could not move.

"Huh? What are you tal-...Hey, don't send out a surprise attack right after speaking to me!"

"Hah? It's your fault for not paying attention. Oh, you died. Ha, you really suck at this."

A grin appeared on Kirino's face as she turned my character into ash with a flashy special attack.

"You need to quit using those overpowered hidden characters!"

"What's wrong with using something the game lets you use?"

Wow, that's exactly the kind of things people say at the arcade that make everyone hate them.

After making various insults regarding my skill, Kirino suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Oh, right. About what I said..."

"Like I was saying before, what are you talking about?"

Can you not just say things plainly?

"I have another life consultation to ask you about."

" "

H-here it comes...

My spirit practically crumbled inside, but can anyone really blame me? So many terrible things had happened to me due to the turmoil that always began with those words.

"...So do you want me to tell you what it's about?"

If you think I look like I do, you need to go get your eyes checked. Is that something you should be asking as the one asking the favor?

And what's with that barely-suppressed laugh? It's creepy.

I was incredibly reluctant to ask, but I knew she would get mad if I didn't.

"Sigh...Tell me."

"What kind of attitude is that? If you want me to tell you, then act a little more courteously."

"You're worried about my attitude!? If you want me to help you, how about you act a little more courteously!? Give me a break!" I clicked my tongue for show. "And how exactly do you suggest I act courteously anyway?"

"Bow down."

"Why does the one being asked the favor have to bow down!?"

I don't understand! Is your life consultation a divine oracle or something?

"Hurry up and bow down."

"Like hell I will!"

I fell silent in anger, but Kirino must have really wanted to talk about what she was consulting me about because she told me without waiting for me to bow down to her.

"Fine then, I'll do you a favor today and tell you. You should be thankful.

What's with that pompous tone of voice?

My little sister then began telling me about the topic of her life consultation.

I had a feeling it was not going to be good news for me.

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"Are you not even listening? The cell phone novel I wrote is getting published!"

So what would you do if your little sister all of a sudden started telling you crazy things?

I frowned and stared at Kirino who was barely suppressing a grin.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she said.

"No, not really."

What kind of horrible mistake would lead to that rape novel of yours being distributed to the public? And according to Kuroneko, the writing itself was shit too.

I wasn't too knowledgeable about how all that worked, but I doubted getting published was that easy.

"I can't really believe it either, but I guess this kind of thing happens when you have as much talent as I do~!"

Yes, yes. Shut up, shut up.

I couldn't see how it could possibly be true, but I felt a bit uneasy because my sister was not the type to say things without basis.

Also, even though I clearly did not believe her, Kirino's calm did not crumble.

She folded her arms and looked down on me with an expression that seemed to say, "You just don't understand anything, do you?"

"You want me to tell you how this happened, don't you?"

"You're right. Tell me."

I really didn't, but she would have gotten mad if I hadn't asked.

"Ehhh~? Well, I guess I have to then."

Kirino pulled out her cell phone and started tapping on the keys. After a bit, she triumphantly handed it to me.

"Take a look at this site."

"O-okay..."

The cell phone site displayed seemed to be called Cell Phone i-Club. The most eye-catching part of the site was that name displayed in large characters. The site had an overall colorful and fanciful design. Below the title, various menus were listed.

Just like when I had first looked at that walkthrough wiki, there were too many things to choose from and I had no idea what to do. It was quite a bit more complicated than just checking the forecast on your phone.

"Heh, well? Do you understand now?"

"No. Where am I supposed to look?"

"Hahhhh? Let me see that!"

Kirino peered over at the cell phone from and operated it while pressing up against me.

"H-hey, don't get so close," I complained.

Our arms were pressed right up against each other. A sweet scent caught my attention.

I swore to myself that I wasn't a siscon. My reasoning was that this had nothing to do with her being my sister.

But in the next instant, I realized that wasn't the way I had thought about the issue just a few months before.

However, in yet another instant, Kirino's elbow jabbed me in the gut. This sent that realization sinking back down to the depths of my mind.

"Here! Press this link to the library!"

"I-is this publication information what you wanted me to see?"

"No, look below that at the monthly rankings."

"Oh, here?"

I lined the cursor up on the indicated area and finally saw what Kirino wanted me to see.

How was I supposed to find this when you just handed me the cell phone at the top of the site, you idiot?

"That shows the monthly popularity rankings for the cell phone novels submitted to this site."

"Submitted?"

Seeing my confused expression, Kirino's mouth twisted in irritation.

"Sigh...Do you even know what this site is for?"

No, but why do you seem so shocked by that fact?

God, you piss me off!

"I guess I have to explain that as well. ... What a pain."

She listlessly brushed back her hair. She always made sure all of her little actions were so seductive.

Tch. I don't really care.

However, I had little choice but to hear her out. If I cut her off partway, she would just get mad.

And so she explained it to me.

According to her, Cell Phone i-Club was a site that allowed people to easily create their own webpages on their cell phones. Those webpages could either be used for a blog or as a message board on which to interact with other people.

"So it's kind of like the social network you signed up with before?"

"I guess it's sort of similar. Things are called blogs or social networks or whatever, but the differences between them are often rather vague."

"I see..."

As usual, I gave an arbitrary response because I didn't really understand.

"Originally, the different sites had more originality in what they did, but lately blog sites have been adding more social networking type functions.

Popular services like WebClap and Twitter are being copied by everyone, so sites have gotten so cluttered and generic. It just makes you wonder why you wouldn't just use the more well known one, y'know? Anyway~," said Kirino getting back to the subject at hand. "This Cell Phone i-Club lets you write and submit cell phone novels."

Apparently, the novels were the main draw of that site. You could put your cell phone novel on the webpage you created and submit them to be entered in popularity polls held by the site.

The monthly popularity rankings Kirino had mentioned before were the results of those polls.

"And so the especially popular cell phone novels on Cell Phone i-Club get published."

"Hehh..."

I had heard of such things happening on the news, but it was the first time I had ever actually learned of a novel getting published that way.

Basically, cell phone novels aren't written by professionals.

Well, the authors of ones that get published did receive money, so maybe you could call them professionals, but let's not split hairs over definitions.

When you really think about it, what that Cell Phone i-Club site did was lure in amateurs with the possibility of getting their cell phone novel published. It was actually a pretty good method.

Hmm, now things are starting to add up. But...wait...

"S-so the novel you wrote was...?"

"Yes! It got 1st in the monthly rankings!"

"Really!? That rape novel did!?"

"Really, really! Eheh. Isn't it amazing♪ Kyaaahh~~!!"

Kirino let out a high-pitched squeal and then put her hands on her cheeks and squirmed embarrassedly.

It looked a lot like when she was putting on an act, but this time I'm fairly certain that was honestly how she felt.

She must have been truly happy indeed to let her guard down that much in front of me.

She even didn't seem to mind that I had let the term "rape novel" slip in my surprise.

To be frank, I just couldn't believe there were readers who interested in that novel.

I can't believe it. If I told Kuroneko, she'd probably die of shock. If she found out that novel she criticized so heavily was popular enough to get published, her worldview would probably crumble.

However, I had not actually read Kirino's cell phone novel.

That said, I had no interest in reading a story my little sister had thought up. Especially after having just hearing a vague outline had made me want to kill her.

"Isn't it actually quite something to get your very first novel published?" I asked her.

"Eh? Ehh~? I don't really know all that much about this kind of thing, so I don't know~! Is it? I guess that just goes to show how great my talent is! Maybe I should apologize to all those big-headed wannabes who have been submitting novels for quite a while now~~\s\"

God, you're annoying.

Kirino was even more annoying than usual.

I only found this out later, but "wannabe" was a term used to mock the authors who wanted to get published but did not make it. The way she was talking pissed me off and I wasn't even trying to get published, so I'm willing to bet the "wannabes" she referred to would have wanted to kill her had they heard her. Much like Kuroneko had before.

"There must have been a lot of kind people for your novel to get published."

"Hm? Oh, no, no. It's getting published, but it's a bit different from normal."

"Ahn?"

"It isn't getting published for being #1 in the rankings this month."

"Then why is it?"

"Go get me a snack and a drink."

"That sentence has nothing to do with this conversation!"

Don't suddenly change the subject just to order me around!

And why am I only complaining inwardly while I head over to the refrigerator?

In her usual place on the couch, my little sister started speaking while drinking the cola I had gotten for her.

"Now back to how my cell phone novel got published."

According to Kirino, cases of novels getting published due to getting first in the monthly rankings on Cell Phone i-Club were more or less nonexistent.

That alone did not mean a novel was popular enough.

Instead of the monthly rankings, the requirement for getting published was...

"Getting over a million page views seems to be the standard for getting published."

"Page views?"

"It's how many times the cell phone novel was read."

"I-I see... So you need over a million people to read it!?"

"No, you don't have to go quite that far. If the same person reads it twice, the view count goes up both times. Think of it like an internet access counter. You need a million hits total over every page of the novel."

In other words, if someone read a 100 page novel all the way to the end, that would count as 100 views.

And so the one million page views referred to it being read one million times, not by one million people.

"But even so, a million is still a huge number. I mean, even if the novel is 100 pages, people aren't necessarily going to read all the way to the end, right? If they don't like it, they'll quit reading."

"True. The really popular cell phone novels tend to surpass a million views in about 3 months. After that is when Cell Phone i-Club contacts them. And of course, not every novel that makes it past a million views gets published."

So basically, a novel the site managers did not think would sell would never get published no matter how many views it got. They were a business, so that should come as no surprise.

"That's quite a hurdle..."

Since my sister had suddenly come out saying she was getting published, I had been a bit mistaken about the process.

Not just anyone could get their cell phone novel published like I had originally assumed.

Although I suppose that kind of thinking was unfair to those who had worked to get published.

"That really is a strict requirement."

"Yeah."

"By the way, how many page views does your novel have?"

"About 350,000. And it's only been a month since I submitted it."

"I see..."

Wow. At that rate, she might actually make a million by three months...

"But that isn't even close to a million."

"I know. That's why I was so surprised when they contacted me...Heh heh." With a huge grin on her face, Kirino munched on the cookies I had gotten for her. "Yesterday, I got an email from an editor who had read my novel."

"Eh? But Kirino...isn't this a little too good to be true?"

And what exactly is an editor?

I only knew that they were someone who worked for the publisher.

"Possibly."

I had thought she would be mad at me for ruining her excitement, but Kirino seemed to receive my comment calmly.

"The editor wants to meet me to discuss the details."

"Is this editor a man or a woman?"

"Probably a man."

"He might be lying about being an editor. If he's some creep, that could be dangerous."

It may have been unfair to all the editors in the world, but that job title just left me with a suspicious impression.

Also, cell phone novels were mostly written by school girls and the possibility of having one's cell phone novel published would make for juicy bait, so it was possible someone would try to pick up girls by pretending to be an editor. I folded my arms with a sour look on my face as Kirino studied my expression.

"Ohh? What, are you worried about me?"

"D-don't be ridiculous. Why would I be worried about you?"

I turned the other way and Kirino let out on oddly gleeful laugh.

"Kya ha ha! Well, you are a siscon after all. God, you're creepy."

"I already told you I'm not! Just give that a rest already!"

Dammit, is she ever going to let that go?

Kirino let out a ridiculing laugh with an extremely nasty look on her face.

"Fine, fine. Never mind that then. Anyway, what are you gonna do? If you want to come with me, I'll take you along."

".....Kh."

I see. So this is what the life consultation is really about.

Basically, she was afraid to meet the man claiming to be an editor on her own, so she wanted me to go with her.

Sigh...

If she would only ask me, I would have no choice but to go along. I'm not a monster after all. But not with that attitude of hers. If I say I'll go, it'll look like I'm volunteering out of worry for her!

Why would I go!? Are you an idiot!? Surely you can come up with a better way of asking!

With that counterattack prepared, I asked her an extremely nasty question.

"...Hm. By the way, what'll you do if I don't go?"

"I'll go on my own."

"Are you stupid!? Take mom!"

"No. Mom can't keep secrets, so she'd definitely tell dad. When I started secretly modeling, he found out from her in no time at all."

I see...

It was true that that old woman couldn't keep a secret. In fact, Kirino had it easy. She had told everyone in the neighborhood about the first porn magazine I ever bought. Do you have any idea how it feels to come home from elementary school and see your mother talking to the lady next door and waving the June issue of Cream in her right hand?

Well, enough about my trauma.

"So you want to keep your cell phone novel a secret from mom and dad?"

"Well, yeah. Dad would probably be against it."

She had a point.

"If it gets published, that's going to involve money. You can't keep that a secret from our parents."

"I know, but I want to keep it a secret up until the very last second."

Apparently, Kirino intended to wait until her publication was set in stone and then be with her editor while she informed our parents. Laying down the groundwork and getting someone who was on her side was probably a fairly good strategy. She must have learned what worked when she had to convince our parents to let her work as a model.

"So I can't tell mom. If you don't come, I'll go on my own."

"...l see."

I almost told her to just do so, but I suddenly imagined the scene of my little sister going on her own.

If you ignored her personality, she was pretty good looking... And if she was somewhere with a lot of people like Tokyo, she would probably have guys hitting on her. Lastly, if this so-called editor turned out to be a bad guy, there was only so much a middle school girl could resist no matter how reliable she was.

I wasn't really worried about her, but when she asked me so directly it did bother me a bit.

Tch. Looks like I have no choice.

"...Fine. I'll go with you."

"Hah? What's with that reluctant expression? If you don't ask me properly, I won't take you with me."

"Please take me with you!"

Now I just sound desperate! God, if someone calls me a siscon now, I'm not sure I can argue back!

I really wasn't one though.

And the next thing I knew, it was Sunday.

My little sister and I were on our way to a publisher in Shinjuku. We left the west exit of Shinjuku Station, headed on foot in the direction of the Metropolitan Government Office, and circled clockwise halfway around Shinjuku Central Park. We arrived at a tall building with shiny black windows. Apparently, the publisher was located within that building.

I was surprised at how many huge buildings there were in Shinjuku. There were tons of people and the layout of the station had been incredibly complex. It almost felt an underground labyrinth.

I checked the time on my cell phone and breathed a sigh of relief.

"We made it in time. Just barely."

"Hmph. We would've gotten here in plenty of time if you hadn't gotten us lost. Now I don't even have time to touch up my makeup. What am I supposed to do?"

Kirino was dressed up in a much more mature look than usual. Well, she normally dressed up fairly maturely, but this seemed like a different kind of mature.

With an ocher pantsuit and a liberal amount of makeup, her outfit seemed like that of a working adult. It was a much more formal way of dressing up.

"This is the first time we've been here, so of course we're not going to perfectly know how to get there."

Really it was that map's fault. An eight minute walk from the station? How fast are they assuming people are walking?

Part of it was due to getting a bit lost in the station, but it had taken us over 15 minutes.

I silently cursed the map I had printed out from the publisher's official site.

"So were you supposed to meet in the lobby?"

"Yes. At 4:30. ... You wait here."

"...Hm? You don't need me to go in with you?"

"Don't be stupid. After going to all the effort of dressing up with this formal fashion, do you really think I would waste it all by being with someone dressed like you? You need to stay away from me."

But didn't you have me come with you because you were afraid to meet this guy alone?

I don't know if she read my doubts from my expression, but Kirino pressed her mouth shut and remained silent for a bit.

She finally opened her mouth and said, "You don't have to come with me...but stay nearby. If I send a blank email, come right away."

"Will do."

I decided I might as well do what she said.

"Okay, I'm going."

"Sure. I'll be waiting here."

Kirino lightly raised one hand and entered the lobby. The automatic door opened and closed.

I moved over to the pillar at the side of the entrance so as not to be in the way and waited. I held my cell phone in one hand in case Kirino sent an SOS.

Hmm, was there really any reason for me to come along?

Just as I thought that, Kirino exited along with a slender man wearing a suit.

"Oh."

I wasn't doing anything wrong, but I still hid behind the pillar.

My cell phone then started to vibrate.

"ן"

I tensed up, assuming that she had already sent an SOS, but that turned out not to be the case.

"We're going elsewhere. Follow us."

"...Fine, fine."

I was impressed that she could casually type out an email while walking like that. I certainly wouldn't have been able to do it.

Hmm, I guess they aren't going to have the discussion in the editorial department.

I tailed Kirino and the man from a short distance away. After crossing a nearby intersection, they headed due south for a bit and finally entered a café.

"Now, what am I to do?"

I wondered if I should head in, too. Before I could make up my mind, my cell phone started to vibrate again.

"!! Oh...It's just a normal email."

Because of the instructions she had given me before leaving, every incoming email made me jump. I kept thinking something bad had happened to her.

Okay, what does this say? "Wait there"? Fine, fine...

I sighed as I looked up at the evening sun. I ended up waiting outside the café for just under an hour.

When Kirino exited the café alone, the sun had already set and darkness had set in.

She was grinning happily. It was clear things had gone well.

I raised one hand to wave my little sister over.

"Hey, finally done, are you?"

"...Huh? Are you still here?"

"Ha ha. You say some horrible things, don't you?"

Are you still here?

Are you still here!?

That's horrible! I can't believe people are allowed to say things that horrible!!

I wasted my day off to go all the way to Shinjuku with you and waited for an hour thinking an SOS could come at any second! Is that any way to treat your brother after he did all that for you!?

"Why are you tearing up? Oh, were you that worried about me?"

"Not in the slightest! Why would I be worried about you!?" I shouted and turned around.

I took a few steps away as if to leave Kirino behind and then...

Now, let's see if she regrets that comment.

I turned around.

"Why are you getting in a taxi!?"

"Eh? I was given money to take the taxi back to the station."

Don't look so surprised at my reaction! And I was asking why you were so naturally just leaving me behind! ... Well, whatever. My words would be wasted on you.

Incidentally, the area had a surprising number of taxis passing through. That was likely because there were enough customers for them, but that fact had left me dangerously close to the horrifying experience of turning around to find my sister completely gone.

After a short argument, Kirino and I headed for the station in the taxi.

We spoke in the backseat on the way.

"Well? How'd it go?"

Was that editor someone you can trust?

Kirino enthusiastically replied, "He said I was exactly what they were looking for! And he said I was a good representative of girls these days! And so I would be able to get the readers invested in the story! He just kept praising me!"

"...l see."

That wasn't what I had meant, but whatever. From the look of her, he at least wasn't some dangerous guy. But just to be sure, I asked another question.

"What kind of person was he?"

"Hmm." Kirino brought her finger to her lower lip as she thought. "He seemed like a really serious person. I guess you could say he had the feel of an elite businessman. He had really good manners. Oh, and I asked all sorts of questions about the editorial department and he answer all of them without hesitation. And most importantly, he gave good constructive criticism of my cell phone novel. Nothing like what I was worried about happened."

"..."

I hadn't really been worried, but I was still glad that the guy had turned out to be legit.

It was true that he had seemed like he was on the level. I had only seen him from behind, but the nice suit he had been wearing had made him seem like a proper member of society.

"Heh heh. And he was pretty good looing."

What does that have to do with anything? That's the problem with girls... They judge everyone by their appearance.

I frowned and fell silent.

"What are you upset about?" Kirino asked. "Oh, and I got this."

She held the man's business card out toward me. I took it and gave it a thorough inspection.

Apparently, he was Kumagai Ryuunosuke of MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department Mobile Publication Division.

Below his name, the publisher's phone number was printed and below that what was most likely his personal cell number and email address were written in pen. Next to those, he had written "<- Use these", so those must have been the best way to contact him.

"Kumagai-san, hm?"

"I've gotten business cards from publishers in my modeling work before, and they were all like this."

"I wasn't saying it was fake. ... Well? What about your novel getting published?"

I couldn't stand my sister's boastful tone of voice, so I changed the subject.

And Kirino did not seem to mind.

"Oh, right. About that. He wants me to write a new novel. We talked about it a lot, but he said the current one wouldn't catch the eyes of the readers well enough. Anyway, he wants me to narrow down the target audience. Apparently, if I write a story while thinking about what the readers would want, it'll be a lot more popular. He said if I write something good, it'll get published."

"...Are you actually going to go through with that?"

I had a few concerns.

"Yeah. After coming this far, why wouldn't I?"

I was pretty sure nothing I said would change her mind, but I decided to voice my concerns anyway.

"It's your decision, so I won't stop you and I don't feel right ruining your excitement. But do you really have time for that?"

My little sister was the ace of the track team, a teen magazine model, a student with some of the top grades in the prefecture, and even an otaku who had recently made her Comiket debut.

That was what I meant when I asked if she had time.

I had recently heard my mom bragging once again about everything she was doing.

She was doing really well in track and her work, but those things had a way of getting especially time consuming at the end of the year.

Also, I was fairly certain she had said some game she had preordered in Akihabara came out at the end of the year. Knowing her, she would definitely work to finish it as soon as possible. With everything she did, I had already wondered where she found the time, and now she was planning to add writing a cell phone novel on top of it all.

"That's true. I'll probably be pretty busy."

Kirino herself must have had the same concern. She folded her arms and stuck out her lower lip as she thought. She held out one hand and started muttering as she counted on her fingers.

Not long after beginning, she simply said, "Well, I'm sure I'll manage somehow. Who do you think I am?"

"I see. Well, that's your problem," I said carelessly.

I thought I felt an odd proud feeling, but I must have been imagining it.

"Yes, it is. It's none of your business. Oh, by the way. Before long, I need to go to Shibuya to collect data. You're coming with me because you were of no help today."

Fine, fine.

It wasn't even worth getting mad anymore. No matter what I said, it wouldn't help.

Once she said something, she wouldn't listen.

I resigned myself to the fact that she would get her way.

Time passed and December 24th seemed to come in no time at all.

As usual, I was walking to school with Manami.

"Hey, Kyou-chan. ... Are you free today?"

"Ahn?"

I glanced over and saw her usual soft smile.

"We're having a Christmas party at our place tonight. We're making sekihan and cake. So...if you like..."

"I'll pass. I already have plans."

"Gaaaaan."

Manami's mouth fell open in shock.

She dropped her bag and her jaw trembled.

"Wh-wh-what plans do you have?"

"What's with that over-the-top reaction?"

"I-it isn't. It isn't over the top..."

It was. She was way more shocked than usual.

"...U-um...Who...do you have plans with?"

Hearing her quiet voice, I fell silent.

For a few seconds, I considered whether I should tell her or not, but I finally turned away and said, "It's none of your business."

"Fweehh....Uuhh..."

Don't get so upset.

It's not like I can tell you that my Christmas Eve plans are to...

"...go to Shibuya with my little sister? Really?"

"Did you say something?"

"No," I quickly responded to my sister's threatening question.

My plans were to go to Shibuya with Kirino in order to collect data for her cell phone novel.

We exited the station and headed toward the intersection in front of 109. Someone was using a van with speakers attached to annoyingly shout about god or something.

The sunset dyed the sky and night would set in soon. Once it did, we would likely be able to appreciate the illuminations decorating the area more.

As usual, Kirino was decked out in her model fashion and she perfectly blended into her surroundings as if she were truly in her element. The area was filled with people like Kirino.

The crowd in front of the station had reminded me of Akiba and Comiket, but the clothes and faces of the people in the crowds had been completely different. Everyone was extremely stylishly dressed and the odds of passing someone good looking were much higher than usual.

It was enough that my sister did not even stand out.

Mhh...It's so much that my clothes seem plain in comparison....

"Tch. You're wondering why I chose Christmas Eve, aren't you? I didn't want to, but the novel I'm going to write has a lot of scenes on Christmas Eve. Due to that and the deadline, today was the only option. As much as it pained me, I even refused Ayase's invitation. Normally, I would be at the Christmas party being held by the office she works for."

Kirino simply would not shut up.

You don't have to act so much like you're doing me a favor. If it wasn't for this, I would be at the Tamura family Christmas party like usual.

You should be thanking me for coming here instead.

"Hey, are you even listening? Do you really understand what I just told you?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, l get it."

"Hah. Don't act so conceited. It's creepy."

"I said I understood! You're the one not listening!"

First Kirino then Ayase then Kuroneko and even Saori. Why can't middle school girls listen to what people tell them? They need to learn from a certain plain glasses girl!

"Well? What does this data collection entail?"

I understood the general idea, but I had no idea what it actually involved.

Since we had simply been walking around, I was beginning to doubt there had been any point in my coming. As I gave my sister a questioning look, she was simply muttering while looking at her memo pad.

"Kirino?"

"I heard you. I'm trying to bring it all together, so be quiet. Okay, first let's..."

Apparently, the memo pad Kirino was looking at had a general outline of the plot of the cell phone novel she was going to write.

Kirino looked back and forth between the memo pad and the Shibuya street before pointing at the intersection ahead of us. It was a famous intersection often seen in dramas and the like. The light happened to be green, so a large number of people were crossing.

"Let's start there."

"The Shibuya scramble crossing, hm?"

I had no idea what kind of story Kirino planned to write, but apparently a scene was going to occur there.

"So what's going to happen at the scramble?"

"We're starting with the prologue. The middle school girl who's the protagonist is on a date with her boyfriend on Christmas Eve."

"Hah?"

"Do I have to explain everything? I can write the novel more realistically if we simulate the actions of the characters."

"I see. So that's what you meant by 'collecting data'. I take it you'll be the protagonist while I'll be the boyfriend."

"I don't like it, but yes."

I finally understood why she had brought me along. I had never written a novel, but apparently actually seeing the things was best. In that case, I could help out.

I was once more impressed at how seriously she took things when she put her mind to it.

She had gone so far as to ruin her Christmas plans for it.

She was the same way with the track team, with studying, with her modeling work, with eroges...and, it seemed, with cell phone novels.

"Okay, got it. So what's first? Are we going to walk across holding hands?"

"Well, first I need you to get hit by a dump truck."

"The boyfriend gets turned to mincemeat at the very beginning!?"

What kind of gory novel is this!?

"Don't be so disgusting. Shocking the readers with a tragedy at the beginning is standard in love stories."

"Don't act like you know what you're talking about. Oh, and I'm not going to do that!"

"Ehh? Sigh... Already you're being selfish. We're supposed to be doing this according to the plot I've written. If you don't actually do it, I can't get any real data."

"But why do you need to simulate the fate of the mincemeat boyfriend!? What kind of data are you hoping to get from your brother's splattered corpse!?"

As I shouted at her, Kirino held out one hand like a psychometer aiding the police.

"A clue as to who did it?"

"You did it!"

So the boyfriend really dies at the beginning of your new novel? That's a bit of a downer isn't it...?

"Just so you know, cell phone novel readers want this kind of thing."

Really? Where is all that confidence coming from anyway?

It sounds more like the prologue to a horror novel to me...

"Fine, I guess it would be a problem if you were put out of commission at the very beginning. I'll just take some pictures here."

Saying that, Kirino starting snapping photos of the intersection with her cell phone camera.

Oh, she looks like she's taking this seriously.

"That's enough for here. Let's head to the next place."

Next, we headed into 109. When I saw a concert stage being constructed at the entrance, I was reminded that it was Christmas Eve.

For anyone that doesn't know, 109 is a building in Shibuya filled with all sorts of stores selling women's clothes that are popular with the youth.

I only knew this because Kirino explained it to me.

The area the building covered was not that large, but it had 8 floors and 2 basements, so it was packed full of Shibuya-style girls. It was the first time I had been inside it, but I still strongly felt like I did not belong there. I thought I felt unwelcome gazes, but I may have been imagining that. The odds of seeing a beautiful girl in there were even higher than outside in Shibuya. Slender girls only a step away from being on the level of an actress and girls with too much makeup were all over the place. It was quite a sight. Oh, and I also smelled a strangely sweet aroma that seemed familiar. I soon realized it was the same scent my little sister's room had.

"First, let's head up and look at the clothes."

"Okay, okay."

I gathered up my courage and continued on in. While looking at clothes, we moved up floor after floor on the escalators.

"Wow, all the clothes here are amazing. Who would ever wear that sexy see-through miniskirt that mannequin is wearing?" I commented.

Stores were also selling clothes that looked like something Marilyn Monroe would wear, clothes that looked like something from an idol performance, and other clothes that only a really good looking girl would be able to wear without being embarrassed. It was possible actual women in the entertainment business bought clothes there.

"You don't have to give a running commentary. If you keep your mouth shut, maybe no one will realize you're some hick, but really you should just head back to Chiba."

"You live there too! You need to apologize to everyone that lives in Chiba!"

We went up another floor on the escalators and reached a floor selling clothes that were more on the cute end of things. The clothes there seemed more childish and I could actually imagine normal girls wearing them. Some of the prices were even in the 5000 yen range.

Hmm...

"Why are you staring at that mannequin like that? Don't tell me you're planning to buy that."

"No, I was just thinking that none of these clothes would look too good on Manami..."

"Hm, I wouldn't say that. Especially the ones on this floor. They're not as showy as the ones on other floors."

Kirino usually only insulted Manami, but now she was defending her. Since fashion was one of her specialties, she must have merely naturally given her honest opinion. And to be honest, I had been thinking the clothes on that floor might actually work with Manami.

But then Kirino touched the waist of the mannequin as a thin, mischievous smile appeared on her face.

"But all the clothes around here are pretty narrow around the waist. Could she really wear them?"

"Probably not..."

Manami had a way of getting a bit plump around the waist from the beginning of fall to the end of winter.

"I thought not. Kya ha ha! All those Japanese confectioneries have made her into the plain girl deluxe!"

"Don't make fun of people's looks! You'd get mad if someone said you had a round face for a model, wouldn't you!?"

Kirino's laughter completely disappeared and she slapped me with a monstrous look on her face.

"Oww!"

O-ohh... I guess she's a bit sensitive about that...

After we had finished making our rounds of the eighth floor, we headed to the basement.

We skipped passed the first basement and down to the second.

"So do we just have to walk around here to get the data you need?"

"More or less, but this is our real destination."

Kirino lumbered on, leading me to an accessory shop named Samantha McBee. It was filled with dazzling displays of earrings, rings, and other accessories. I picked up a few and they were mostly in the 2000-3000 yen range, so they were reasonably priced. Since the area was popular with the youth, 109 had plenty of surprisingly cheap things.

"So what kind of scene is supposed to happen here?"

"The main character goes here on a date with her boyfriend," muttered Kirino bluntly.

"Her boyfriend? But wasn't he just turned to mincemeat?"

"Obviously, it's a different boyfriend. This takes place a month after her previous boyfriend dies."

Hmm... One month, huh?

"What's with that look? Do you have something to say?"

"No, it's just that isn't that a bit quick to get a new boyfriend after the previous one died?"

And the girl's in middle school. How much of a slut is she?

"That's normal. I don't see the problem."

"How can you not? Won't this make the readers mad? I know I wouldn't want to read something with such a heartless protagonist."

"You just don't understand. That's the guy way of thinking about it. To me, it looks like she's working hard to get back on her feet, not heartless."

"Is that so?"

I decided not to say anything more about that. After all, I would never be able to understand how middle school girls thought. It was Kirino's story, so she could do whatever she wanted.

"So buy me an accessory."

"Hah? Wh-what? ... What did you just say?"

That had come out of nowhere, so I thought I had misheard, but Kirino clicked her tongue.

"In the scene, the boyfriend buys her an accessory, so you need to buy one for me."

"...!!"

You heard that, right!? That's the kind of crap she pulls! I had never thought she would try to get money out of me in the name of gathering data.

I glanced over at my sister's face only to find a mocking expression.

"Ohh? What's this? Can you not even afford something like that? I can't believe it. You're really throwing a wrench in my plans..."

She always just said whatever she wanted.

From an onlooker's perspective, I looked like a broke boyfriend who couldn't afford a present on Christmas Eve.

Uuhh... I can't stand having everyone staring at me like that. It's like lying on a bed of nails...

"...What do you want me to buy?" I said in resignation.

"I chose what I wanted when I was here before. I want this limited Christmas edition silver ring & accessory set. Isn't it cute?"

As Kirino had already chosen what she wanted, she immediately pointed toward a showcase.

Mh...Well, I guess I can manage that. Actually, it's pretty cheap.

"Kh. Okay, okay. ... Excuse me."

I reluctantly called over a saleswoman, but soon regretted having done so.

The text on the price tag had been so small, that I had missed one of the zeros.

Th-thirty thousand!? It thought it said three thousand!

Trying to look as cool as possible, I wiped sweat from my brow and said, "Your brother only has 18,000 yen on him. Kirino-chan, could I borrow a bit of money?"

But when I turned around, my little sister was gone.

What? Damn her! She realized what was going on and ran off!

"Sorry about the wait, sir. That would make an excellent gift for your girlfriend."

"Umm, actually, never mind! Ha ha ha!"

I gave the saleswoman an obsequious laugh and hurriedly left.

"I can't believe you! Why don't you have enough money!? I just can't believe you!"

"Shut up! It's your fault for choosing something so expensive!"

Kirino and I were arguing as we exited 109.

I wanted to believe that I was merely imagining the occasional snickers coming from the crowd around us.

"Sigh... God, now I'll be too embarrassed to ever go back to that shop. And I didn't even get any data for the scene where the boyfriend buys her an accessory," sulked Kirino.

The way she spoke was rather cute, but I wasn't about to let that fool me. She was definitely cursing me inside.

"Calm down and think about this for a second. I'm a normal high school boy. I don't carry around that much money. Wouldn't it be the same for this boyfriend?"

"No. He's already a proper member of society and has lots of money. Hmph. If I made a guy as poor and lame as you her boyfriend, the readers would stop reading right there."

Should you really be saying that about your brother?

I decided to go with a sarcastic counter attack.

"Oh, I see. Well, sorry about...wait just a second."

"What?"

"This guy's a proper member of society and he's dating a middle school girl!?"

"Is that a problem? He's the young president of a startup company."

I believe that is what you call a lolicon! He's clearly some kind of creep!

I really wanted to yell that out, but my sister was likely to get mad if I complained about her story, so I tried to be a little more roundabout.

"Isn't it bad to have a middle school girl with an adult boyfriend?"

"That's completely normal, you idiot. It's pretty standard for these kinds of things."

Really? Really!? Sorry, but I can't see how that could possibly be normal. Maybe this is what they meant when they said shoujo manga was getting a bit extreme of late...

Kirino must have seen the worry on my face because she went on to explain her thinking.

"I really have to explain everything to you, don't I? Girls my age are suckers for stories about older boyfriends. After all, the boys at our schools are all a bunch of immature brats. We'd rather date a monkey from the zoo than one of them."

" . . . "

Is that how the girls in my class view me?

I wish she hadn't told me that...

"In my personal opinion, a love interest needs to be at least in the second year of high school. Anything below that is out of the question."

"...I see."

I let out a heavy sigh.

I felt sorry for the boys from her school that had a crush on her.

Although I was pretty sure she would be too much for any boy her age to handle.

Actually, she would probably be too much to handle for any guy.

If anyone actually started dating her, he'd either have to have a kind personality on the level of Buddha or he'd have to be a masochist.

"But what am I going to do now? Thanks to you, I can't write the scene where her boyfriend buys her an accessory at '09."

As Kirino muttered, she started writing in her memo pad with a pen. She may have been changing the flow of events.

"Oh, I know. I can have it happen the same way. I can just have a scene where her boyfriend doesn't have any money."

"What, so did he lose his wallet or something?"

"No, I wouldn't write anything that clichéd. I'm going to use the scene for a date with a different poor boyfriend.

"A different...poor...boyfriend? What happened to the lolicon president?"

Oh, crap. In my surprise, I used the nickname I had given him. Sorry, sorry.

Kirino then explained the fate of the lolicon president.

"His wife and company find out he was cheating with a middle school girl and he is utterly ruined."

"It was adultery!?"

That lolicon is even worse than I thought! Why couldn't he be the one you killed off!?

"So after all the drama this causes, the boyfriend returns to his beloved wife. After being so harshly abandoned, the main character is terribly hurt...and she...stops trusting guys... Uuhh...Don't you feel sorry for her?"

Um, no? It was her own fault.

The one I felt sorry for was the wife. She was simply too kind. She really shouldn't have forgiven him. I know that's what Mino Monta would say.

And if your husband cheated on you with a middle school girl, wouldn't you normally divorce him and sue for damages?

My heart had gone cold, but Kirino continued her explanation.

"And then the main character is so hurt she falls into despair and joins a prostitution group. Y'know, schoolgirl prostitution."

"Wow, what a slut."

I had been unable to resist letting my true thoughts slip out, but can you really blame me?

I mean, what kind of horrible development is that? Could anyone really like a protagonist that was that much of a bitch?

"What did you just say!?"

"Nothing, nothing!"

As my sister glared at me with fangs bared, I put on a fake smile.

Wow, that was scary...

"Fine then," said Kirino as she glared at me. "And so she has a new boyfriend starting in the next scene."

"She sure goes through them fast. S-so, does this one die or fall to his ruin as well?"

"No! This one stays till the end. After all, the theme of the book is pure love."

"...P-pure love?"

What the hell did she just say?

I was utterly confused.

"That's right! Pure love!"

Kirino puffed her chest out proudly. She held no doubts about what she had just said.

From what she had said, apparently repeatedly switching out boyfriends, dating a married man, and prostituting oneself counted as true love as long the girl stuck with one guy at the very end. I really don't want to believe that was normal for cell phone novels and the mainstream way of thinking for middle school girls. Wh-what do you think?

Surely she really meant sullied love, right?

After finishing up at 109, we entered Shibuya Center Street.

As we were approaching the area near Sakuraya, Kirino said, "That's one of my favorite shops. Its silver accessories are both cheap and have a nice style, so they're perfect for a gift for a high school or middle school girlfriend."

"Are you still insisting I buy you an accessory?"

"Of course. The poor boyfriend may not have much money, but he has a really good fashion sense. He says 'sorry I couldn't buy you an expensive accessory' and then takes the main character to this shop. Isn't that so cool?"

Kirino was proudly praising the boyfriend she had thought up.

While inwardly irritated, I said the line my sister wanted as kindly as I could manage.

"Sorry I couldn't buy you an expensive accessory."

"God, you're annoying!"

"Why!? That's just unfair!"

It hadn't been easy for me to say such an embarrassing line.

Kirino gave an extremely displeased face.

"For some reason, it sounds really creepy when you say it. I wonder why..."

Don't look so puzzled! How long are you going to keep up the attack!?

While continuing to complain, I ended up buying her a 10,000 yen pair of earrings!

By the time we left the shop, it was getting dark. It was midwinter, so the nights were extremely cold.

The breath of passersby was visible even when they were wearing face masks.

We headed straight down Center Street.

We turned left at an arbitrary corner and exited out on a larger road. After another right turn, we walked on for a bit until Don Quixote and Tokyu finally came into view. Kirino pointed forward.

"The next scene happens there. Well, actually this scene happens later, but since we're here, we might as well do it now."

"Okay, okay. What do we have to do now?"

"First, I'll run toward Tokyu, okay?"

"Okay."

"But the light will be red, so a car will come roaring toward me, okay?"

"O-okay..."

"And then you'll push me out of the way and get hit in my place."

"Your boyfriends sure get hit by cars a lot!"

"You don't actually have to get hit. After you knock me to safety, you can jump out of the way of the car."

"I'm not performing any acrobatics!"

"Oh, and this will give you amnesia."

"Your cell phone novel certainly has plenty of clichés!"

If she went through each and every one of them like that, it might actually end up being something original.

All my shouting back at her had left me out of breath and Kirino shrugged and sighed.

"You've been doing nothing but complaining. I thought you were here to help?"

"I'm willing to help, but I'm not willing to die. And what kind of story is this anyway? Is a scene like that really necessary? Let me see that memo pad."

"...Fine."

Kirino must have been a bit embarrassed to have me see her story because her cheeks reddened a bit.

I took the memo pad and read through the plot written across a few pages.

"Okay, let's see."

## Characters:

Main Character (Her name is Rino. A first year middle school girl. A standard level of cute. <- About half as cute as me.)

About half as cute as me!? What kind of self-praising memo is this? What kind of author uses her own looks as a standard for the characters? A-and...

"Rino? You used part of your own name for the protagonist?"

"Is that a problem? I did it because it's easier to write the character if I can empathize with her to a certain extent."

"I guess it isn't a problem, but just the other day you were complaining about how creepy it was for Kuroneko to project herself onto the protagonist of her doujinshi. Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

"It's okay when I do it."

She didn't hesitate to say that! That's the kind of person my little sister is!

The character description for Rino continued.

(She has an extremely pure personality. She views romance as extremely important and is easily hurt. She has a super cute little sister.)

Wait, I thought she was a bitch and a whore? She was supposed to be pure?

Honestly, I can never understand how she feels about things...

Her personal tastes were also evident in the "super cute little sister".

(The little sister's name is Shiori-chan.)

And the sister's name came from an eroge.

Boyfriend 1 (His name is Tetsu. Suddenly gets hit by a dump truck and dies. Can be a bit rough, but is occasionally very kind. \*It is his first time dating a girl, so he isn't sure how to treat one. &It;- Isn't that cute?)

Boyfriend 2 (His name is Kazu. 32 years old. The young president of a start-up company. Actually has a wife and kids. His company and wife find out about his infidelity and he abandons the main character. He is socially ruined. Suicide maybe? Really good at sex. The suit moe type. Hangs around with the main character for fun, but occasionally gets really serious. Seems like a true adult man. Isn't the main character cool for manipulating a grown man?)

From the "occasionally gets really serious" part, I could only see him as a lolicon.

It was amazing how the protagonist's boyfriends kept dying. It went beyond just being a downer.

Boyfriend 3 (His name is Toshi. The one she sticks with in the end. A super hot guy. His family is actually rich, but he's poor because he doesn't want to rely on his family. A second year high schooler. Works as a model for Men's Non-No. &It;- The money from his job all goes to his band. Sings the vocals for a band. Can also play the guitar. Blond. His grades are the top of his year. Also the captain of the soccer team.)

I couldn't stand the sound of that guy. He was like a male Kirino.

Really, really kind and worries about her a lot. He loves the main character, but he refuses to admit it.

He goes all out on everything and doesn't give up no matter how hard things get.

" "

I frowned and read on. After the character introductions was an outline of the plot. In the prologue, her boyfriend gets hit by a dump truck. Then she catches the lolicon president who then abandons her, and she falls into despair and starts whoring herself. That much she had already told me. After that, Rino meets someone new while sulking. That someone was Toshi. He was kind, cool, and perfect in every way. He scolds Rino and has her quit being a prostitute and helps her out in various other ways as well.

Rino had become distrusting of guys, so she does not trust him at first. In fact, she originally speaks harshly to him and tries to distance herself from him. However, Toshi is very patient and sticks with her. Due to the way her previous boyfriends kept dying or falling to their ruin, Rino was rumored to be cursed, but Toshi did not care. After they grow closer, he finds the people spreading the rumors about her and gets mad at them for her.

Ridiculous. No guy would go that far for a girl like that.

Reading the summary had made me rather angry. I wonder why that was.

Anyway, the summary continued on from there. However, I've had enough of interpreting it, so I'll just give it verbatim.

Rino opens her closed heart and starts dating Toshi. She quits the schoolgirl prostitution and starts taking life seriously once more.

But one day, Toshi is hit by a car and loses all his memories.

It happened because he was protecting Rino, so Toshi comes to love Rino all over again.

With his precious memories still gone, the story continues for the two.

But one day, Rino is raped. Even so, Toshi continues to love her, consoles her, and supports her.

But one day, Toshi gets leukemia. Because Toshi is hospitalized, Rino gets lonely and cheats on him. (<- Toshi's best friend tempted her. He had always loved Rino and decided to make himself happy after what had happened to Toshi. &lt;- This makes drama with a love triangle.)

It was a horrible story. A truly horrible story. Just reading the summary was sapping my energy.

How hard a life does this Toshi have to have?

When Toshi learns of his best friend's betrayal, he tries to back out of the love triangle himself. However, Rino really truly loves Toshi more, so she says she wants to be with him even if he is sick. Toshi's best friend that Rino betrayed dies in a bike crash that night.

"Hey, Kirino, have you decided on a title yet?"

"No, not yet. All I know is it's definitely going to have 'little sister' in it somewhere."

"The little sister hasn't shown up at all outside of the character introductions!"

"I'm going to put her in as a really, really important character later!"

Oh, I see. I say the title should be "The Girl that Brings Catastrophe".

Rino clearly brought death and misfortune with her. All of the characters in the story let their feelings at the time rule their actions.

Sigh... At this rate, I hate to think what kind of sad ending this has...

Rino and Toshi break down crying. They remain together to the end of his limited remaining time.

What? So the boyfriend dies and it ends? Isn't that a little-

In the end, the power of love blows away the sickness or whatever to give them a happy ending.

"What the hell?"

I almost tripped!

"What? Do you have a problem with the plot I came up with?"

"Yes, with that last line! Even if I kindly overlook the rest of the story, I can't let that ending go! You clearly got fed up with writing it properly and threw that in there to end it! You need to think this through to the end!"

"I haaaaavvveee! You just don't understand. Readers these days want a happy ending!"

"That doesn't excuse this! I know nothing about this stuff and even I can tell this is bad!"

"It's fine! It only looks bad in the summary. In the full text, it'll seem completely natural! After all, plenty of eroge viewed as masterpieces use that ending! It's a standard in the tear-jerker eroge to have it look like the poor heroine is going to die and then have her come back to life in a flash of light! I'm just using that technique for a cell phone novel! Do you understand now?"

" "

Where the hell does all that confidence come from!? Fine, just do whatever the hell you want!

I understand now why Kuroneko wanted to kill you!

As we argued, we continued to walk. We passed by Tokyu and headed toward Maruyama. When we turned from the main street to an alley, the area started to get more and more seedy.

Specifically, the walls and shutters had obscene graffiti spray painted on them and indecent hotels dotted the area. I started to wonder where we were headed.

Suddenly, I heard a voice ahead.

"Up through #B100 may now enter. Please do so in an orderly fashion."

A long line came into view.

At first, I was reminded of Comiket, but something like that would never be held in Shibuya.

The line seemed to be heading into a live music club.

I see. So that's where she intends to gather data next.

"Okay, I understand now that you have thought this plot through."

But there was still one thing that had been bothering me. I couldn't help but ask her.

"Kirino...About this guy...Toshi."

"What?"

"Why does he go so far for such a bitch?"

My theory was that he was a masochist.

"That's..."

Kirino almost replied immediately, but she suddenly stopped for some reason. She mumbled, thought for a bit, and finally responded with a frown.

"That's because he loves her."

"Keh."

Ugh. I can't believe her.

After heading toward Maruyama, we entered a live music club to see a performance by a popular rock band called Shiva. Apparently, the band would be the model for the band Toshi and his best friend were in, so Kirino seemed to be trying to burn it all into her memory. I just thought the place was too loud. It really wasn't my kind of place.

Just as with Summer Comiket, I never wanted to go back. Just being there really wore me out.

Hoo...I guess this might've been one of the reasons she made sure we went on Christmas Eve.

So far, everything had gone rather well. I was utterly exhausted from being dragged around by my little sister, but it also seemed that nothing worse could possibly happen. I completely forgot the lessons I had learned when we met Ayase on the way back from Summer Comiket or when our parents found out about Kirino's hobby.

Of course, my optimism was without basis.

Something was soon going to happen that would shock me to my core.

After the performance ended, we exited the club.

"Okay," Kirino said as she suddenly headed for a nearby convenience store as if she had just had an idea.

"...Where's she going?"

I stuck my hands in my pockets and watched her. She soon exited the convenience store holding a bucket filled with water. She was lugging the heavy bucket my way.

It seemed she had borrowed the bucket from the clerk.

"Hey, Kirino. What's the bucket for?"

I don't see why she would need to pour any water around here...

"Don't tell me you're going to dump it on me."

"Of course not."

I-I see. Good. I guess not even she would do something like that.

Just as I was breathing a sigh of relief, I heard a loud splash.

"Wha-...?"

The splash had come from...

"What the hell are you doing!?" I shouted, wide-eyed in shock.

My sister was soaking wet. Her hair was plastered to her face and cold drops of water were dripping from her clothes. It was a terrible sight to behold.

The splash had come from Kirino dumping the bucket of water on herself.

"..."

Soaking wet, Kirino ignored my voice and the gazes of those around her, walked over to the wall of the club, and sat down.

With her arms hugging her legs, Kirino shivered. Her heavy breathing was visible in the cold.

The weather was cold in December and the sun had set, so the temperature had to have dropped quite a bit.

Also, the water itself had to have been quite cold.

All the guests leaving the club were standing in shock at Kirino's sudden action.

I don't get it! Why would she do that!?

My thoughts were in complete chaos, but I only hesitated for an instant.

"Y-you idiot! I'll go buy you a towel."

"Not yet."

"Ahhn!?"

I spun back around and bared my fangs without trying to hide my irritation.

I was of course shocked by my sister's sudden action, but my anger was greater.

I didn't know why she had done it, but I couldn't believe she would do something like that in front of her brother.



The response my stupid sister gave me while shivering was quite a shock.

"I-I need to know how the main character would feel...so wait a bit longer."

"No! Are you a complete moron!?" I shouted back reflexively.

I had still not comprehended what she had said.

What? What did she just say? She needs to know how the main character would feel...?

"What are you talking about? Wait...don't tell me this is part of the data you need!"

You're soaking wet and shivering in the cold! I don't get it! I can see your breath in the air. Please, stop this! I can't bear to watch it! God...

"On Christmas Eve, Rino gets soaked by the rain and waits for her ex-boyfriend even though she knows he isn't coming. So...I need to do this..."

"I don't care! Just put this on!"

I took off my jacket and put it over my seated sister's shoulders against her will.

I then glared at the onlookers to drive them off. Luckily, the anger in my eyes was enough to drive them back. That reduced the number of quizzical looks and scornful smiles turned in Kirino's direction.

"Now I just need to get you a towel... Let's see..."

I ran over to the convenience store and quickly bought a towel.

When I returned, I placed it over my sister's head and forcibly dried her off.

"H-hey! Where do you think you're touching me!?"

"I'm drying you off!"

Don't keep talking to me like that at a time like this.

I guessed her wet clothes had likely robbed her body of quite a bit of heat, so she was likely to catch a cold. My first thought was to find a nearby public bath.

As I was trying to put together a plan while completely flustered, Kirino pulled on my sleeve.

"I-I'm cold..." she complained with a blue face.

"Of course you are!"

You're the one that dumped a bucket of water over your head! You idiot!

Do you never think of the consequences of your actions!? There's a limit to how serious you can get about this kind of thing!

Those clothes you went to so much trouble of dressing up in are ruined...

"This is the scene where Rino first meets Toshi... As Rino sits here soaking wet from the rain...Toshi exits the club and spots her. I was thinking that would be the best way to do it..."

"...Tch."

She had said all sorts of crazy things like having a character get hit by a dump truck or a character losing his memories, but she seemed to have been serious about it all.

She had gone so far as to put her own body on the line for it.

Being able to stick with something to that extent may have been praiseworthy, but I simply could not understand it.

I could only be utterly shocked.

I mean, it's a bit creepy, don't you think?

"H-hey..."

"Ahn? I'm trying to figure out what to do, so wait just a-...What?"

"Th-the next place I need to get data from is...there."

"A-are you still going on about that...?"

Kirino was stubbornly pointing in one direction, so I looked over that way while utterly dumbfounded.

"Wh-wh-what!?"

I was so shocked at what I saw, that I almost bit my tongue. When I looked up at the blue building Kirino was pointing at, I lost any remaining hint of calm.

As some people might know, the area we were in was also known as the love hotel district.

"A-are you stupid!? Why do I have to go somewhere like that with my sister!?"

"D-don't call me your sister so loudly! ...Achoo! When Toshi finds Rino soaking wet in the rain, it's only natural for them to head to a love hotel. Th-there's nowhere else around here to take a shower...Achoo!"

"Gnnnhhhh....! A-a-aaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrggggggghhhh!"

I shouldn't have come! I shouldn't have gone to Shibuya with my little sister!

And so we now reach the point I started with at the beginning of the chapter. Do you understand now how I ended up sitting on a love hotel bed waiting as my little sister took a shower? By the way, due to it being Christmas Eve, the love hotels were packed full. It had been hard to find an open room.

"Sigh... I give up..."

When I calmed down and thought about it, I realized it truly was strange how much effort Kirino was putting into this data collection.

And then another thought entered my head.

Wait. When the main character in her cell phone novel finishes taking her shower...they aren't just going to check out...are they?

H-how far is she going to go in simulating this?

"....Ah."

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!

Why did I have to imagine something as disgusting as that!? Oh, god. That was horrible. I have to be some kind of idiot. She would never do that!

As I listened to the sound of the shower, I felt an awkwardness that I cannot really put into words.

How long is she going to spend in the shower! Just finish up already!

Suddenly, I heard a beeping noise and the cell phone in my back pocket started to vibrate.

"Oh."

That made me jump. Who's calling me?

The LCD display said Tamura Manami.

I had been so overcome in awkwardness that the phone call seemed like a form of rescue.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Ah, Kyou-chan? Thank goodness you answered..."

"Huh? What, did you try to call me before?"

"Y-yes. Sorry about being so persistent."

"I don't mind. It's my fault for not noticing anyway. So what do you want?"

"U-um...well..."

What a strange girl. Why is she so nervous about talking to me?

"What?"

"U-umm...Kyou-chan? Are you done with the plans you said you had at school today?"

"No, not yet."

It was hard to say I was in Shibuya with my sister, so I gave a vague answer.

"...I see," replied Manami. "When...do you think you will be done?"

"I don't know exactly, but I plan to be back by 9:30."

My parents had said they were headed out somewhere. My mom had likely invited my dad on a Christmas date. Anyway, another reason Kirino had

chosen today for this was likely because we could get away with breaking our curfew.

I don't see any other reason why she would choose Christmas Eve as the time to spend with her hated brother.

"H-hmm..."

"What is it?" I replied.

"I-I made enough cake for you, Kyou-chan. Do you think...you could stop by my house...on your way back from what you are doing?"

Her voice grew quieter and quieter as she continued.

"If I have time, I will."

"Really? Thanks."

Why are you thanking me? Isn't that backwards?

Manami hesitated and said, "U-um..." a few times before saying, "Ky-Kyou-chan...by any chance...are you with...another g-girl...?"

"..."

Oh, I get it. There's been a misunderstanding. Actually, I should've realized it sooner! So that's why she's been acting so weird! Shit...How am I supposed to respond?

I couldn't exactly say I was with my little sister in a Shibuya love hotel. If I did, an even worse misunderstanding would occur before I could fully explain the situation. I was unsure what to say.

"Wh-why aren't you saying anything?"

Whoops. If I don't say anything, she's going to jump to the wrong conclusion.

I had no choice but to tell the truth just without the parts that would create misunderstandings.

"No, I'm with my sister."

"You're sister? Kirino-chan?"

"Yeah."

"S-so you're on a Christmas date with Kirino-chan?"

I hated the way she had put that, but given what we had done, she wasn't too far off.

"I wouldn't call it a date. We just went shopping and saw a band perform."

"Isn't that called a date?"

Shut up. This still isn't a date.

"But I get it now. If that's what you're doing, have fun with Kirino-chan."

Manami seemed to have accepted my answer, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

And then I heard the bathroom door slide open.

"Hoo. That was one refreshing shower. So nice and warm. Hey, the lights in love hotel bathrooms shine like a rainbow! I didn't know that!"

Dammit, Kirino! Why did you have to say that now of all times!?

"Ky-Ky-Ky-Kyou-chan? Where are you and Kirino-chan...?"

"Ahh!! I think I'm losing the signal!"

I hung up and turned off my cell phone.

While panting and sweating, I gave an audible gulp.

Shit, did she realize where we were? From that last comment, it really sounded like she had...

I had merely hung up because I hadn't been able to come up with an excuse.

"Sigh..."

I felt depressed when I tried to think about how to deal with the misunderstanding that had likely just occurred.

This is bad. Really bad. What kind of brother goes to a love hotel with his little sister on Christmas Eve?

And it isn't even a misunderstanding! God dammit!

As I held my head in anguish, Kirino spoke to me.

"What? Who were you on the phone with?"

"Shut up! It's all your fault! How could you do that!? Now my childhood friend is going to have the wrong idea! It's all over!"

"What are you talking about? I'm not sure what your problem is," said Kirino as the scent of soap filled the room. "But can't you just quick load and choose a different option?"

"This isn't an eroge!"

Kh. If only I had that option!

Wait...

"Wh-what the hell are you wearing?"

I had been looking down and about to cry, but I froze the instant I looked up. This was because Kirino was standing there in a bathrobe.

"Y-you disgust me. Don't look at me with those lustful eyes. I had no choice. My clothes aren't dry yet. In fact, why aren't you using the blow dryer to dry them?"

"Oh, I see. Sorry for not thinking of that," I said sarcastically.

I took the blow dryer Kirino had just been using and started drying her wet clothes.

Why do I have to dry off my sister's camisole while she spouts abuse at me?

"Heh. Don't tell me you were aroused by seeing your little sister in a bathrobe. That's the problem with siscons. They're just so creepy and disgusting."

"You are the last person I want to hear that from!"

In more ways than one!

Ignoring my retort, Kirino turned around and started wandering around the room in her bathrobe. She opened and closed the drawers and flipped through the pamphlets on the bedside table while typing with one hand on her cell phone. She also occasionally snapped pictures with her cell phone camera.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Gathering data."

You're still doing that? I guess she was serious when she gave that as a reason to come here.

She was being very thorough. Her enthusiasm was a bit creepy to watch.

As Kirino continued to wander around the room and take notes, she opened one of the pamphlets.

"Given the plot of my new novel, I'm gonna need some prostitution scenes, aren't I?"

"...Y-yeah. So?"

"How about we call in one of these call girls? I need some data on that kind of thing."

"Do you want me to punch you!?"

Dammit. How does she keep finding new ways to surprise me?

Just to be clear, we did not actually call one.

After that, we left the love hotel and walked through the city at night, heading for the station.

I thought over the events of the day.

We had gone shopping in Shibuya, seen a band perform, and gone to a love hotel.

It felt like we had covered everything that modern middle school girls would think a Christmas date would involve. Having to deal with the data collection at each place had been an issue, but it had all been a new experience for me. Normally, I would never go to such places.

"You should remember what we did today. It might come in handy one day. I know any date you would come up with would be lame as hell. Like going to a local department store or something."

"..."

Wow. How did she know what I had done on Christmas last year?

"Any guy who takes a girl to KFC on Christmas Eve deserves to die."

"Students don't have much money! Give us a break!"

What's wrong with KFC!? I thought that was the standard! Am I wrong!?

There had been a fair amount of trouble, but Kirino had been extremely lively all night.

She had acted the same as when she had gone to Akihabara.

Both going around Shibuya looking at clothes and earrings and going around Akihabara looking at games and doujinshi were things she loved.

That was what she meant when she would say that she would no longer be herself if either of them were taken from her.

"Did you get all the data you needed?" I suddenly asked as we walked along the lit up streets.

"More or less. At the very least, I got enough to make it worth ruining my Christmas Eve plans," she answered from right next to me.

"I see."

That's good.

"What's with you? ... That's creepy."

"Heh. It's nothing."

It was just that I was surprised by something.

The time had seemed to go by so quickly.

I wasn't sure what it was I was feeling.

I had never gone on an outing with just my sister like that before.

Was I feeling that it wasn't too bad? ... No, no, no, no, no.

Hah. That just wouldn't be like me. It certainly wasn't that. After all, I'd have to be a masochist to feel being treated so horribly "wasn't too bad".

With the data collection over, we boarded the train home. Sitting next to me, my sister was muttering while lost in thought. She may have already been working out further details for her cell phone novel.

I had no idea if it was a good thing or not, but Kirino had already started writing her cell phone novel the very next day on Christmas.

And then the school term ended and winter break began.

New Year's Eve passed and the New Year began. It was the morning of New Year's Day.

As I walked down the stairs, I spotted my mom and gave my New Year's greeting.

"Hey, Happy New Year, mom. I'd like my New Year's money."

"Why do I have to give New Year's money to my son?"

Because that's how the system works? How cold. She could at least act a little less like that's the norm...

But in the Kousaka household that was the norm. As the eldest son, I only got New Year's money up through elementary school.

It really wasn't fair because Kirino still got some. You could feel the difference in the love they showed us.

"More importantly, aren't you going to the shrine with Manami-chan today? Don't you need to get going?"

"I've still got time."

I made a shooing motion with one hand and slipped by her side, but she grabbed my wrist from behind.

"Wait just a second. I still have something to talk to you about."

"What?"

"That."

My mom pointed through the slight opening in the living room door. Inside, Kirino was sitting in her usual spot on the couch giving her whole attention to typing on her cell phone.

"Lately, she's been typing on her cell phone in every spare moment she has. Do you have any idea what she's doing?"

"Nope."

Unfortunately, I had promised to keep her cell phone novel a secret from my mom.

I feigned ignorance and my mom put one hand to her cheek worriedly.

"Remember how I told you she was going to be really busy at the end of the year? Well, even during winter break, she has track practice and lots of modeling jobs. Since – unlike you – I can be proud of her, that's fine, but I want her to at least take it easy when she's at home. She also doesn't seem to be getting enough sleep, but she won't tell me what she's doing. Before, she was still using her cell phone even in the bath! I was really shocked."

Ever since that data collection date, Kirino had been walking around the house with her cell phone in one hand. Whether she was in the living room, the hallway, or the stairway, she would be typing away whenever I spotted her. She had been doing that the entire time, so I had actually wondered if she was writing her novel even in the bath. Apparently, she really had been.

"Also, she seems to have had a cold for a while now. She was a bit feverish again this morning..."

"Eh? Really?"

"Really. Really, really. So I'm worried. I don't know what she's working so hard on, but her health needs to take top priority. But no matter how many times I tell her that, she just ignores me. Really she's just so stubborn. She reminds me of a certain someone."

Ahhh! That idiot.

I had a good idea why she had that cold. It was clearly due to dumping that water on her in the cold winter weather.

I stared into the living room at her. She did indeed look like she was suffering. Her face was red, her breathing was heavy, and she would cough occasionally. She was clearly pushing herself.

What? No, I wasn't worried about her. I may have gone with her that day, but none of it really mattered to me. Why should I care what my little sister was doing?

It was just that...Well, you heard what my mom said. She had track practice, model work, and eroges, so I knew she was quite busy even outside of the novel.

"Well, I'm sure I'll manage somehow. Who do you think I am?"

She had said that, but she clearly was not managing.

It was because of how much effort she put into everything she did that I felt that way. And by "that way" I don't mean I was worried about her. Really.

"Kyousuke, do you really not know?"

"I really don't. In fact, I haven't spoken with her in a while now. You know that."

"Hmm, you're right. But I had thought you two were finally starting to get along. Did you get into a fight?"

"...Leave me alone."

Basically, she was done with me. The previous life consultation had been to go to Shinjuku with her and then to Shibuya. That was over.

That's right. The role for her brother was over and now it was her problem alone.

Our sibling relationship was back to when Kirino was so busy at the end of last year's summer break. In other words, we barely ever spoke, did not consult each other over anything, and just ignored each other.

Really, I was glad. I hadn't been dragged to Winter Comiket and had been able to have a nice leisurely New Year's. I had my usual peaceful days back.

"...Ah, I feel so refreshed."

As I watched my feverish sister continue to type on her cell phone, I muttered one thing in my heart.

Try not to go too overboard, okay?

"A cell phone novel? Hehh. Kirino-chan really is amazing."

"I'm not so sure. Well, she does work hard, I'll give her that. Oh, and she doesn't want our parents to know yet, so keep it a secret."

"Okay."

The topic of my sister came up while I was walking to the shrine with Manami.

Kirino didn't seem intent to keep the cell phone novel a secret from anyone but our parents, so I didn't hesitate to bring it up while chatting with my childhood friend.

They weren't particularly popular at the moment and writing one was nothing worth bragging about, but it was also nothing to be embarrassed about.

That was how Kirino and other middle school girls seemed to view cell phone novels.

Because movies and manga were made from them I had viewed them as being fairly popular, but apparently they weren't.

A few major hits like that one with a two kanji name or that Deep something or other one had merely created a kind of temporary cell phone novel bubble.

Well, I only brought it up as idle chatter. That world was of no concern to me.

After finishing with that topic, Manami timidly said, "Kyou-chan...What do you think...of my outfit?"

Befitting New Year's, Manami was wearing a light purple kimono. The style was like something an old lady would wear, but...

"Japanese clothes really do suit you."

That was one great thing about her. She wasn't all that attractive, but Japanese clothes had a way of tripling how good she looked.

"...R-really?"

"Yeah. If it were up to me, you'd always wear them."

"E-ehhh?"

From the way she blushed, Manami must have actually been happy.

While giving a bitter smile at how she was acting, I retied my scarf as it had started to come undone. I had been given the scarf as a present by Manami on Christmas Eve when I had stopped by on the way back from Shibuya.

When Manami saw me with the scarf on, she shyly said, "We match."

"Keh," I spat out and sped up, leaving my childhood friend behind.

The plaid scarf Manami was wearing despite wearing a kimono was one I had given her on Christmas Eve. I had bought it at as a present for her when I had been in 109 with Kirino. In a complete coincidence, the scarf I had bought and the one Manami had made for me were the exact same color and pattern. It was quite embarrassing. It was like we had been forced to wear matching scarves. Neither of us had intended for it to turn out that way.

She had even gone out of her way to wear it along with her kimono. The way we were walking around wearing matching scarves, we had to have looked like a lovey-dovey couple. I had no idea what I would do if we ran into someone we knew.

"W-wait up."

Having been left behind, Manami jogged to catch up. I thought about speeding up even further, but then I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Nothing really. It's just...Look."

I pointed forward with my eyes narrowed. A number of vans with tinted windows were parked by the riverside. I thought they looked familiar, and sure enough, three or four girls in kimonos got out of the vans.

"Oh, are they having another photo shoot? You know, like at the park half a year ago."

"Looks like it. From the way they're dressed, I'm guessing they're doing it at the shrine over there."

"I see... O-oh? Is that Ayase-chan?"

"Ugeh!?"

My back stiffened at the mention of that name.

I frowned and looked around. And I spotted her. She was there all right. That black-haired girl was wearing a blue kimono, had her hair done up, and was as overwhelmingly beautiful as ever.

She was Aragaki Ayase, a middle school girl who was Kirino's friend, classmate, and fellow model.

I don't feel like getting into the details, but I really did not like her. You could say she was my natural enemy.

After all, she felt I was a perverted siscon of a brother that was in love with his little sister and an eccentric otaku that collected little sister-themed eroge and doujinshi.

Also, she had a habit of saying she was going to kill me or have me arrested.

At any rate, I did not want to meet her. Luckily, she did not seem to have noticed us, so we could sneak away.

"Ayase-chaaan!"

"Don't wave her over here!"

"Huh? Why not? I thought you got along well with her, Kyou-chan."

That was before that sad incident! Aaaaaahhhhhh!! She noticed us! She's headed this way...

"Hello, onee-san. It's been a while! Happy New Year!"

"Y-yes. Happy New Year. It really has been a while. About half a year I think."

Manami seemed overpowered by Ayase's aura of beauty.

If you can't handle being near her, don't call her over.

As I glared spitefully at Manami, Ayase gave me a greeting that seemed to have a hidden meaning.

"Onii-san, it's been a while since I've seen you, too! Happy New Year! How are things with Kirino lately? Ah ha ha. Are you two getting along?"



She was definitely thinking "Depending on your answer, I may have to kill you" behind that cheerful smile.

"Th-things are going okay, I guess."

Manami added to my timid and vague response.

"Ah hah. What are you saying, Kyou-chan. It seems to me that you have been getting along quite well with Kirino-chan lately. You know, like at Christmas."

Wh-wh-why did you have to bring that up!?

"Christmas? Hehh. I can't overlook that. Please tell me more!"

That is one scary smile! And she clearly isn't smiling in the eyes!

"Sure. On Christmas, they went on a date and went to a public bath called Love Firefly<sup>[5]</sup>."

"Eh? A public bath on Christmas?"

Ayase was staring at me as if to say, "What kind of choice is that?"

Shut up!! I couldn't exactly tell Manami I went to a love hotel with my sister! That's why I had to make up that lie! And I'm well aware it's a really bad excuse!

"Th-that doesn't really matter. Hey, you look really good in that kimono! I guess that's a model for you! Ha ha ha!"

I tried to change the subject before she could pursue it any further.

"..."

I only received an awkward silence in return. She was glaring at me with cold eyes. She likely held a grudge because Kirino had turned down her invitation on Christmas Eve.

"Well, whatever. Anyway, onii-san, about Kirino. She does not seem to be doing too well..."

"Yeah, I know. But nothing I tell her will stop her."

"Yes. Sigh. I was hoping maybe you telling her would do something."

"I was hoping you could. I take it it didn't do any good."

Ayase and I came to an implicit understanding.

Not knowing what we were talking about, Manami was left with a quizzical look on her face.

From what Ayase said, it seemed Kirino was the same outside our home as she was in it.

Constantly working on her cell phone novel, that is.

"It was no good at all. She said her cold was not bad enough to affect her work and that she would not let it stop her. I of course admire her attitude toward work and it is amazing how she shows no sign of being under the weather while working, but it's clear she is pushing herself too hard. She won't listen to me at all, so I'm quite worried."

Ayase had been looking down at the ground as she spoke, but then she looked up at me and pushed out her lower lip bitterly.

"Please look out for her while she's at home."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

My little sister was not the type to neglect things she was supposed to do. I learned that first hand in the turmoil she had put me through.

Basically, she did not cut corners in anything she did. In a way, that could actually cause everything to suffer overall. She could be a quite troublesome to deal with and she was probably the most stubborn person I knew.

Once she had her mind set on something, no one could stop her, so it was best to just leave her alone.

You idiot. You shouldn't worry your friends like this.

Kirino finished her cell phone novel soon after winter break ended. It had taken her about 20 days since we had collected all that data on Christmas Eve. I had no idea if that was fast or slow, but it was clear that she had given it her all.

I could tell that without even reading it.

"Zzz..."

Kirino was asleep sprawled across the living room desk with her cell phone in one hand.

Empty energy drink cans were scattered on and about the desk.

The lack of sleep had had quite an effect on her face which currently had no makeup on. I doubted she would be able to do any model work like that.

Those bags under her eyes would definitely be a problem.

But from what Ayase had told me, she didn't have much model work for a bit, so that was likely why she had allowed herself to get to that state. However, she really must have been working hard to let me see her like that. In fact, that may have been the first time I had ever seen her like that.

"Hm...Well..."

"You really do shine when it comes to hard work.

With that comment to myself, I placed a blanket over my little sister's back.



## Chapter 4

A week passed after she finished the manuscript for her cell phone novel and the morning of the annoying opening ceremony came.

Kirino had simply pushed herself too hard and her cold had gotten worse, so it seemed she was bedridden. I say "seemed" because she was so feverish that she stayed in her room even during meals, so I never had a chance to see her.

While I was eating breakfast, my mother came over to speak with me while looking a bit down.

"Kyousuke~. That girl still has a high fever, but she is insisting she goes to school."

"She's complaining about having practice and her job, isn't she?"

"Yes, exactly. Sigh. She simply won't listen, so I just asked your father to talk some sense into her."

I knew it. That idiot brought this on herself.

Well, she isn't going to get over this cold through pure willpower and she'll have no choice but to stay home today once dad lectures her.

Tch. She'll probably insist on going to school each and every day until she gets over this fever.

I could only shake my head.

"I'm worried, so I'm taking her to the hospital today. I've heard the flu has been going around lately."

"Oh, I see." I sipped at my miso soup. "Just warn her to make sure she doesn't give it to me."

"Hah. Why are you so heartless? You're her brother."

"Keh. Like I care about her."

Are you stupid? Worrying for her isn't going to make her get better any faster.

When I got back from school, my mom told me that Kirino did indeed have the flu. "Oh, I see," was my honest reaction. I could not think of anything else to say.

After washing my hands and rinsing out my mouth more thoroughly than usual, I headed upstairs.

"..."

After a few moments of indecision, I knocked on my little sister's door. She may have been asleep, so I knocked lightly.

I received no response. Deciding she must have been asleep, I scratched at my cheek and started to turn around, but then I heard a click and the door opened.

That door that usually slammed forcefully directly into my face had no energy today.

Kirino peered out at me in her pajamas through the cracked door.

"...What?"

...Oh, I haven't thought of anything to say. Why did I even knock on her door? I don't have any business with her. Um...uh...

"...Hey...do you want some yogurt?"



I held out the plastic bag hanging from one of my hands. I had bought the yogurt at a convenience store on the way home.

"...Sure."

Kirino's feverish head nodded and she took the convenience store bag. She seemed oddly docile, but that was likely because she did not have enough energy to verbally abuse me. Ironically, my sister was a lot cuter when she had the flu and didn't talk much. It was worth giving up my yogurt for.

"Have you taken your medicine?"

"...No."

"Take it."

I then realized Kirino was holding her cell phone in her left hand.

"What are you doing with your phone?"

Don't tell me she's still working on that novel...

"Quit being stupid and get back in bed."

"..."

Despite having been scolded by her brother, Kirino only hung her head down.

She seemed even more downhearted than you would expect of someone suffering from a fever.

Also, it looked a bit like she had been crying.

"What's wrong?"

"...Nothing."

Now, that's a lie. I can't have you thinking your brother is that stupid. I can tell how you're feeling to certain extent just by looking at you. And now that I think about it, someone with as strong a sense of responsibility and awareness that she is a professional as you should be doing nothing but trying to get over this illness on her day home from school.

"It isn't nothing, you idiot. If you're worried about something, tell me. Tell me and then get to sleep. You need to recover so you can get back to practice and work."

Kirino's eyes opened wide in surprise at my bluntness.

"...What's...with you? You're being surprisingly kind."

"Hah. I just want you to recover before you infect me."

I had been trying to speak harshly to her, but Kirino only gave a small laugh.

"You're an idiot," she said. "Well, whatever. Come in. I doubt you can do anything about it, but I'll tell you if you want to hear."

"Fine, fine."

I entered her room despite that meaning it would be my own fault if I caught her flu.

After inviting me in, Kirino sat on her bed and handed me her phone.

"Here."

"Wh-what?"

I recoiled back at having it thrust out at me so suddenly. I then took it and looked at the screen. The main page for Cell Phone i-Club was displayed on the LCD screen. The site had a large announcement written on it.

"An amazing newcomer to the cell phone novel world is having her debut work published in hard cover! It is being published by MediAscii Works! The whole novel is available ahead of time here on Cell Phone i-Club!"

Apparently, a hard cover novel from Cell Phone i-Club was being put online in full as a sales promotion.

Since the author was referred to as an "amazing newcomer" they must have had a lot of confidence in the novel.

The first thing that came to my mind was...

"Is this 'amazing newcomer' they're talking about you!? Wow!"

Kirino gave no response. She took the phone from me, pressed some buttons while coughing a few times, and then handed it back to me. I looked at the screen and saw what must have been a page of the cell phone novel this "amazing newcomer" had written.

Its title was "Little Sister Sky".

"Well, that couldn't be any more obviously you!"

I could tell without even glancing through the text. This was clearly the cell phone novel Kirino had written.

The novel Kirino had so desperately worked to finish was awash in the limelight in a big way.

Below the title was a button labeled "review this work". I clicked it and a large number of people's impressions of the novel popped up.

"What a good story!" "I cried." "Their pure love was the best part." "As a girl, this really moved me."

They went on and on. The book had not even been released yet and there were already over 100 reviews. And they were all favorable impressions. From what I could see, the novel had the strongest support from young girls.

...That's amazing.

I didn't actually say it out loud, but that was what I thought. But I was also a little dissatisfied that the readers had seen Toshi and Rino's relationship as pure love like the author had.

After tagging along when she was gathering data and watching as she worked so hard to write the novel, I was actually moved by this positive reaction. I was amazed at how much talent she had.

...Sigh. She's increased the gap yet again. How far behind are you trying to leave your brother, little sister? It's so frustrating and pathetic that I might just get depressed.

As a smile that was a mixture of self-torture and joy appeared on my face, I realized something.

"Wait, then why do you look so upset?"

I didn't make sense. The novel she had worked so hard to write was being well received, had a huge announcement, and was being published. Normally, that would be a time for joy.

"...else."

"Ah? What?"

"They've made it so it's written by someone else!" Kirino shouted as if she was about to cough up blood before she started coughing normally.

"H-hey, are you okay?"

She seemed to be suffering so much that I reached out to pat her on the back, but she brushed my hand aside.

She was still coughing pretty badly, so I wasn't about to get angry with her.

"What do you mean they made it so it's written by someone else?"

After coughing a bit more and catching her breath, she said, "I-I mean that I'm the one that wrote it, but the author is given as some penname I've never seen before in my life."

I looked and, sure enough, it said "Author – Rino" below the title. The author's name was the same as the protagonist of Little Sister Sky. Presumably they were trying to make it look like the story was something the author had actually experienced, as was common with cell phone novels.

"So they changed the penname without asking because they thought it would sell better with the author and the protagonist having the same name?"

"No! That's not what happened...!" My little sister fell into another painful-looking fit of coughing. "I wouldn't be so upset if that was all it was. Ever since I sent him the password to the site where I saved the manuscript, I haven't heard anything from him. When I call the cell phone number written on the business card, I just get the voice mail, I don't get any response to my emails, and this page appeared without warning."

The site where she saved the manuscript? ...Oh, I get it. You save a cell phone novel to your blog-like page on a cell phone site as you write it.

"Maybe there's been some kind of misunderstanding. How about I call the editorial department for you?"

"I already called them! I told them I wrote the novel and that no one was contacting me and asked them what was going on, but they wouldn't tell me anything! They listened to what I had to say, but they just treated it like a common complaint and wouldn't transfer me over to my editor. Also, the password to the Cell Phone i-Club site I saved the manuscript to was changed, so I can't log in!"

"So..."

This was not a turn of events I wanted to think about. But if what I thought was going on was indeed going on, then having my little sister speak the decisive words would have been too cruel.

That was why I stated my conclusion even if it was a bit premature to jump to that conclusion.

"He plagiarized you? That editor we met in Shinjuku before took the cell phone novel you wrote and is releasing it under someone else's name?"

"...I think so. ...What else could it be?" Kirino muttered painfully while sitting on her bed.

Her face was red from her fever and I could see tears welling up in her eyes. Having this trouble occur while she was bedridden from the flu was like kicking her while she was down.

"So what are you going to do? Surely you aren't just going to lie here crying."

"I'm not going to do anything," was my little sister's unexpected response. "Make no mistake. I only told you about this because you asked. I have no intention of doing anything about this trouble. In fact, I wasn't worried about this at all."

"Why not?"

That had to have been a lie. She had worked so hard on it and it had all been snatched away from her.

I knew just how much she hated to lose, so I knew she had to hate it with all of her being.

"Why not?" repeated Kirino with a scornful laugh. "Isn't that obvious? What I need to do right now is work my hardest to recover and get back to work and practice as soon as I can. Even if I was tricked, that only affects me. I don't have time to deal with something like that. I have much more important things to do."

Her arrogant tone made it sound like she was looking down on the entire world. To me, it sounded forced.

After another fit of coughing, she continued.

"It does piss me off that I was used and I want to kill that faggot. But isn't all that just more proof of my talent? He only stole my novel because it was that valuable, right? Heh. If that one was stolen, I just need to write another one. I'll make this one even more amazing." Kirino folded her arms like usual and gave a small laugh. "Also, that cell phone novel was really nothing more than something to do for fun. I tried to keep it up alongside everything else, but I only ended up collapsing and causing trouble for everyone. I've learned my lesson. I'll make sure that never happens again. In a way, this was perfect."

If she hadn't so clearly been crying, that might have sounded pretty cool.

"So just get out of here and leave me alone."

You really do suck at lying.

My little sister was indeed amazing. She had plenty of talent, put in plenty of hard work, and had an almost creepy passion for something once she started it. As a result, I had thought that everything would always go the way she wanted. However, she was not without her weaknesses.

She had major problems dealing with trouble she had not expected. With difficulties that she saw coming, she was able to thoroughly prepare herself and come up with a plan. But when an attack came from a blind spot or she came across a problem she had not prepared for, she had no idea what to do.

I had experienced that weakness of my sister's in the troubles with dad and Ayase.

She was only 14 years old and in middle school.

No matter how amazing or talented she seemed, I could not forget that fact.

I was her big brother, after all.

"Hoo..."

What do I do now?

After hearing what my little sister had to say and leaving her room, I bit my lower lip while thinking.

Except I wasn't really thinking. While the voice of my heart may have been asking what to do, I had already decided deep down.

What I was doing was worrying. I could not accept why I was so settled on what to do.

After all, I hated my little sister. I really, really hated her.

I may be repeating myself, but I just want to make that very clear.

I had only ever accepted that life consultation way back when as a careless way to end that conversation with her as quickly as possible. My efforts to help her with the trouble with dad or the issues with Ayase were nothing but abnormalities. I had only done those things to put an end to the life consultations I had started. That was why, since she had said she wasn't going to do anything and had not "consulted" in me, this had nothing to do with me. Seeing that damn conceited brat suffer a defeat like that should have been a refreshing scene to behold.

"Shit...What is going on?"

These vague feelings had not started just then. They were a major problem I had been carrying for a little bit at that point. My distant relationship with my sister had changed when I had learned her secret and she had come to me with those life consultations. The vague distance between us was continuing to change even then. I was losing the indifference I had for my little sister.

What was going on? I tried to peer into my own heart, but I only found a jumbled mess of swirling feelings there. That was no help.

I felt nauseous and annoyed and disgusted...

Agh! This really pisses me off. What am I supposed to do? I can't get over this.

Tch. What is this? I wish I knew someone in a similar position, so I could ask them.

Why do I have to feel so bad for that brat of a little sister?

Don't tell me I'm wrong about hating her. Don't tell me I actually...

"Gyahhh!! Like hell I do!"

As my true feelings came out in a yell, I began doing what my sister would normally do on her own since she was too sick to do it herself.

But really, all I could do was consult those who I felt would be reliable.

"Thank you for being so open with us, Kyousuke-shi! I do not know how much I can actually do, but I will help in any way I can!" said Saori exaggeratedly as she sat across from me.

As usual, she was in full otaku fashion with her spiral glasses & flannel shirt tucked into her pants.

"I get the general situation. However, I find it hard to believe that rape novel ended up like that. But from how displeased you seem, it must be true," said Kuroneko as she sipped iced coffee while sitting next to Saori.

We were in a McDonald's near Matsudo Station. I had emailed the two of them to say I wanted to discuss something about Kirino and they had agreed to meet on the weekend because they had both happened to be headed to the preliminaries for a national Siscalypse tournament. The preliminaries had already been held in a nearby arcade called Tokyo Gulliver, and the bag sitting on Kuroneko's lap had a badge indicating she had made it through the preliminaries. (It had the same design as an important item in the game and it had the words "True Little Sister" engraved into it with holographic film placed over them.)

That all-black gothic lolita girl was monstrously good at video games.

The arcade version of that game had come out during the fall, but I had yet to play it.

It was just too embarrassing to play a game like that in front of other people. I had actually been to a local arcade and one in Akagi, so it wasn't that I simply hadn't gone. How can people just go to an arcade and play games like that Something-or-Other Master where you raise an idol or that

quiz game called Something-or-Other Academy? Do you overcome the embarrassment just by getting used to it? I don't really get it myself.

By the way, the badge on Kuroneko's bag had the player's name carved into it, but what it said was Chiba District Representative – Matsudo Black Cat-sama.

Was that something like a ring name?

"Hmm, I see. So that is why she did not come to Winter Comiket."

"Kyousuke-shi. Kuroneko-shi has actually been worried about Kiririn-shi ever since that. We had known she had caught a cold, but Kuroneko-shi had been wondering if she was okay with it lasting so long. And she looked so lonely."

"Hah. I would prefer if you did not add in dramatizations like that. I have not been worried about her. It is just that I was planning to have her cosplay and sell my circle's book if she had accepted my request. I need to get back at her for before. And yet she caught a cold and could not come. She lamented how unlucky she was while clearly sneering."

"I see..."

So she wanted Kirino to take part in that winter event... She put together all sorts of plans and then Kirino couldn't come. I can see why she would be feeling lonely.

"Sorry....and thanks."

"I have no idea why you are apologizing or why you are thanking me."

Kuroneko turned away in displeasure. For some reason, she always got like that when someone praised her or thanked her. I had thought she must have been embarrassed, but Kirino had told me it was something else.

"Oh, no, no. The way that black thing always does that is not her being a tsundere. She's feeling ressentiment. Whenever a rebellious and disgusting otaku like her receives approval from someone on the winning side like me, they always get really pissed off. Really, the jealousy of a lower life form is just disgusting."

I don't really understand what she meant, but that was what she had said. In any case, she really spoke poorly of the girl.

"Getting by without seeing that sweets girl who thinks she is on the winning side during the whole new year's period was most refreshing."

I still think she is just shy, though. After all, I had been the one to compliment her and I was certainly not on the "winning side".

Hearing what Kuroneko said, Saori came to the same conclusion as me.

"Hah hah hah. What are you saying, Kuroneko-shi? You did not find it refreshing at all. It hurts my heart to think about how sad someone without a boyfriend like you must have been during that time without seeing Kiririn-shi."

"That certainly is arrogant of you. Heh. I can tell just by looking at you, that you are forever alone. If you want to prove me wrong, just tell me what you were doing on Christmas."

"Oh, me? Let's see, last Christmas I was painting my Gabthley and making my avatar for Xbox Live. Ha. I was so pleased at how the avatar looked exactly like me that I uploaded a picture to our social network group and bragged about it on Twitter."

What a sad way to spend Christmas...

"Oh? But I think the person I was speaking to online during that was you, Kuroneko-shi."

"...Th-that's right..."

The topic Kuroneko herself had brought up had blown up in her face. She had been trying to mock Saori by asking her what she had done on Christmas, but the response had been "chatting with you".

Matsudo Black Cat aka Kuroneko cleared her throat to smooth things over and said, "To get back on topic, you said this ridiculously titled Little Sister Sky cell phone novel may have been stolen, but can you give us more details?"

"You...will help too?"

"...You surprise me. Is your head okay? I am of course asking out of sheer curiosity. Why would I clean up after a pathetic human like her? I would prefer if you thought before you spoke."

Kuroneko gave lovely little sigh.

"...I see."

Kirino had not asked either Saori or Kuroneko to help with her difficulty, but they had still gathered and were willing to listen. The thought very nearly brought a tear to my eye.

"You two are such good people."

"I do not want to hear that from you of all people. Do you just interpret what people say however you want, you masochistic dog?" spat out Kuroneko with extreme disagreeableness.

When I had first met her, I had thought she was an unsociable girl, but that may not have been true. Deep down, at least.

"Heh heh. Very true," said Saori when she heard what I had said. She also put on her usual  $\omega$ -shaped smile. "Come to think of it, this is the first time we have met with you without Kiririn-shi being here. There is something I had been meaning to ask you if I got a chance. With the offline meeting where we first met and Summer Comiket last year, why do you keep going above and beyond for your sister? At least on the surface, it seems to be nothing but a bother for you."

Saori asked me the question Kuroneko had before.

But as before, it was a difficult question to answer. After all, I had been constantly asking myself that very same question and had yet to come up with a satisfactory answer.

While I was thinking, Saori leaned in toward me.

"Are my suspicions correct that you two are in a more 'serious' relationship?"

"What do mean by 'more serious'!? No! Don't get the wrong idea!"

And what was that about your "suspicions"!? Have you been looking at us in that way all this time!?

This is why I hate erogamers! They always see incest wherever they look!

"Mh," said Saori while sticking out her lower lip when I denied it, but she then put on a horrifying expression. "Oh, is that not it? Then Kyousuke-shi, are you – shall we say – masochistically inclined?"

"That's not it either!"

Why do otaku all seem to have the exact same thought patterns? I can't stand it!

As I scratched at my head, I received unexpected support from Kuroneko.

"It is not that surprising. Being worried about one's little sister and getting a bit overprotective is something that goes beyond liking or not liking someone."

It was possible she was saying that because she had little sisters of her own.

"That is just what a little sister is. It can't be helped. You do it even if you do not get anything in return for your efforts. It is like taking in a cat on a whim."

After concluding her comment, she closed her eyes. She must have been imagining her own little sisters as she spoke. Her words came as smoothly as when she had been speaking about her doujin work at Summer Comiket and her words were also kind.

Her comment also put an expression on Saori's face like you would expect of someone soaking in a hot spring.

"Hm...You must be a wonderful older sister, Kuroneko-shi."

"...Not really. I tease them every day."

Seeing the sadistic smile on Kuroneko's face, I felt saved. The strange feeling in my chest was still there, but I now felt like there was nothing wrong with it being there.

It was okay for my brother/sister relationship with Kirino to advance at whatever pace I was comfortable with.

I felt convinced.

"Okay, let's do this!"

I slammed my fist into my opposite palm.

Saori gave thumbs up with a smile and Kuroneko shrugged expressionlessly.

I had chosen Saori and Kuroneko to discuss this with because they both knew Kirino's secret side and Kirino was important to both of them.

Due to Kirino's position in the world, I had to be careful about who to discuss this kind of thing with. They worked from that standpoint and I figured they would know a thing or two about the writing business, so they were perfect. I was truly thankful.

By the way, there were actually two others who met the requirements I mentioned.

Those were my dad and Ayase. If I got the help of either of them, I doubt there would have been any more powerful helper and their efforts would have rivaled that of a thousand others. However, even if Kirino was extremely important to both of them and they would certainly have listened carefully and helped out had I consulted them, they both had major problems preventing me from doing so.

I'm sure you understand. Their help wouldn't exactly come easily.

First of all, my dad still did not now Kirino's cell phone novel was being published because she was sure he would be against it. And yet Kirino had pushed herself too hard and collapsed from the flu. It was hindering her track team practice and the model work she had gotten special permission for. It would make no sense to rely on our dad for this. If we did, we would need to be prepared for his opposition to her otaku interests to be ignited once more once it was all over.

As for Ayase, I had actually had a chance to speak to her a few days before. (She had called me about Kirino collapsing from the flu. Even though I had warned Kirino, I still got one hell of a lecture about it.)

What she had said afterwards was, "Everyone always praises Kirino for her attitude toward her work, so it really is no big deal if she takes a bit of time off because she is sick. However, I know Kirino. She is going to feel really bad about missing work due to her own mistake."

Apparently, Ayase had spoken to their office and the magazines and volunteered to take on the model work early in the year that Kirino had been scheduled for. She said it would be best if she did it and that Kirino would not feel as bad than if anyone else had done it.

"So I will not be visiting her," she had said.

"I understand. If you catch her flu, you can't fill in for her. I'm not quite sure what to say, but tha-"

"No, do not thank me. I am only doing this because I want to."

Ayase was helping Kirino in her time of need in her own unique way.

We were not the only ones getting overly involved in this.

I could leave that kind of thing to her and take care of what I could here.

And so, I treated Saori and Kuroneko to fries and refills to their drinks while I explained the details of how Kirino's cell phone novel might have been plagiarized.

"I see..."

"Hm..."

Saori and Kuroneko both listened with patient expressions.

"Really, I just want to check if what I think is going on is really what is going on. This editor named Kumagai Ryuunosuke seems suspicious to me," I concluded.

"Hmm. I understand where you are coming from," said Saori in a grave voice as she gathered her thoughts. "But would a mere employee take such a great risk? Even if he was sure that Kiririn-shi's novel would sell, he would lose his standing if this plagiarism came to light."

"And even if this editor did this, I do not understand why he would steal the manuscript. Instead of stealing it, would it not be better to sell the author herself? I think it would sell even better if it said 'the debut work of a beautiful middle school model' on the cover. They could get her face out there with interviews for a cheap and effective means of advertisement."

Those are excellent points.

"But it's hard to imagine this editor had nothing to do with this," I said.

"Kyousuke-shi, if you have his business card with you, could we see it?"

"Sure. This is it."

On Saori's suggestion, I pulled out the business card that editor had given Kirino.

The card read, "Kumagai Ryuunosuke – MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department Mobile Publication Division"

I placed it in the middle of the table and the two of them leaned forward to give it a serious inspection.

"Hmm. Does this Mobile Publication Division run Cell Phone i-Club?"

"I have actually seen a business card for this publisher before, and this looks real to me. I doubt it is a forgery. And even if it is a fake, detailed knowledge of the original would have been necessary to make it," said Saori in agreement with what Kirino had said before.

Kuroneko then said, "Is there actually a Kumagai working for the editorial department?"

"Yes, I called and checked with the receptionist, and there is. It was treated as a prank call, though."

"This is only what I have heard, but supposedly the editorial department receives complaints about plagiarized works all the time. Of course, most of them are incorrect assumptions or downright lies, but the department still hears complaint after complaint along those lines. They may think this is just another of those."

That was the "Boy who Cried Wolf" effect. Finding the one true complaint amid the hundreds of lies would indeed be difficult.

Kuroneko picked up the business card and narrowed her eyes.

"This has a cell phone number and email address written in pen underneath the editorial department's contact information."

"Is that a problem? He said he was out a lot, so it would be easier to contact him via his personal phone and address."

"How trusting are you? You need to have some suspicions about people. Did you never think he was having her call him because it would be a problem for him if she called the company? It's just...Oh, I see. Given what Saori said, I am betting this card itself is real."

"Meaning?"

"Are you thinking the person Kiririn-shi met in Shinjuku was a fake taking on the name and occupation of Kumagai-shi, Kuroneko-shi?"

"Yes."

Kuroneko nodded.

"You mean that bastard wasn't the actual editor?"

"I believe so."

"But this is the actual business card of this Kumagai Ryuunosuke. And they met up at the publisher's office building."

"Don't be stupid. Neither of those things proves he is an editor that works for that publisher. She was told to meet him in the publisher's lobby, right? And you said the actual meeting took place in a nearby café. The lobby isn't locked, so an outsider could easily meet someone there. Also, he could have handed over a business card he had gotten from the real editor to give credibility to his claim. It is a fairly popular means of fraud."

## "...Fraud?"

"Yes, there is a type of self-paid publishing fraud where someone approaches a hopeful author while pretending to be an editor. The fake editor suggests he publishes the hopeful author's book, has them give a down payment, and then is never seen again. ... A bit similar, don't you think?"

"But Kirino never had any money taken."

"True. In this case, it was the manuscript that was stolen, and it is being published by a proper publisher under someone else's name. The trick is similar, but it is still a bit different. I think these differences are rather important," said Saori prudently. "Perhaps this man pretending to be Kumagai-shi has some kind of connection with the publisher. Otherwise, he could not have gotten the novel published even with the manuscript and he would not have been able to acquire Kumagai-shi's business card."

Saori took out her cell phone and held it out so everyone could see the screen.

It was displaying the introductory page for Little Sister Sky.

"I cannot be sure, but it seems likely this Rino person is the one who stole Kiririn-shi's manuscript. I do not know what position this person has, but he must have some influence at the publisher. First, Rino-shi must have noticed the popularity of Kiririn-shi's cell phone novel on the upload site, so he used the real Kumagai-shi's business card to take on the identity of an editor and approach Kiririn-shi. Once Rino-shi received the manuscript from Kiririn-shi, he took it to the editorial department as something he had written, and successfully had it published. Does that seem realistic?"

"Yes, except for the fact that this...criminal?...set his sights on that rape novel. How could he read that and come to the conclusion that it would sell? It is incomprehensible," said Kuroneko as she tilted her head back and forth in confusion.

"That cell phone novel was first in the monthly rankings and had 350,000 views in just a month after being submitted. Maybe he decided Kirino would write a novel that would sell because of how the amateurs were receiving it."

"That is what makes no sense to me. Any readers who enjoyed a shitty novel like that seem like the residents of the demon world to me."

That's going a bit too far.

Not only did Kuroneko have a sense of rivalry and jealousy toward Kirino, but she also seemed to have a negative impression of cell phone novels as a whole. She picked the cell phone up from the center of the table and stared coldly at the screen that was displaying Little Sister Sky's prologue. (It was the scene where Tetsu was hit by the dump truck and turned to mincemeat. The text was as full of newlines as ever.)

"Hmph. Look at this. The shitty writing starts on the very first page. Someone getting hit by a dump truck isn't going to make a 'bakohn' sound. Honestly, just glancing through this is bringing its author's triumphant smile into my head and making me want to crush this cell phone more and more."

"K-Kuroneko-shi!? That is my phone!" Saori shouted as the phone started creaking in Kuroneko's grip.

Kuroneko clicked her tongue and put the phone back on the table.

"So there are really people who would publish writing this bad with no shame? Both the editor and the readers have no aesthetic sense whatsoever."

...Why does she view the editor in such a hostile light?

Did something happen to her in the past?

"Now, now," said Saori to pacify her. "At any rate, Rino-shi is someone who can tell what will sell and has guidance on the level of a real editor. He really did meet with Kiririn-shi, advised her, and actually convinced her. And now he has gotten the novel published. I may not be an expert, but it feels to me like Little Sister Sky will be a major hit."

"Maybe. After her meeting with him, Kirino completely trusted him. She had been really excited, but she had not taken any of it for granted until she had actually met him."

"Hah. To be honest, I want to tell her this serves her right. I had a feeling it was something like this. Do you have any idea how many dozens of hours she bragged to me about this last month?"

...Why am I not surprised? I knew it was unlikely Kirino hadn't bragged to Kuroneko...

Saori looked very interested in that comment.

"Ya ha ha. Come to think of it, the online battle between you two reached even our SNS group. Was the direct confrontation over IM?"

" 'Kya ha ha! With how you are, you'll never be anything but a wannabe! You should try to learn from me! Oh, but I guess you can't! You don't have the talent!' I had to put up with that for an entire night on Skype. I will never forget my grudge over that."

"...Ah, sorry about that."

I had no choice but to apologize when she stared at me with those red eyes filled with hatred.

Kuroneko must have been quite a good person to help Kirino even after experiencing that.

Anyway, that was how we deduced who the thief likely was.

But we could not come up with any concrete ideas regarding what to do about it.

"We have a good idea what the situation is now, but what are we actually supposed to do? I know it would be best to make them realize Kirino was the one that wrote that cell phone novel. But..."

"That will prove quite difficult."

"Yes, we have no proof."

"What about the original manuscript data?"

"The site she saved it to was taken over by this guy. The second she gave him the password, he changed it so she couldn't get into it anymore...or something like that."

That meant we had no evidence that Kirino had written the novel.

Refusing to give up, Kuroneko said, "Is the manuscript data still on her computer? Like a backup or..."

"Kuroneko-shi, even if Kiririn-shi has a backup, I doubt it will change much. The entire novel has already been released on the web. If we came forward saying she had the original manuscript data, they would simply say we copied it from the web."

"...Hmm. That may have been done as insurance made to look like advertisement. ...This guy thought this through surprisingly well."

He was always a step ahead of us. If our assumptions were correct, he was quite crafty.

Silence fell over our table. The three of us each ate the fries that were cold by that point, sipped at our drinks, and gathered our thoughts in our own way."

Saori was the first one to give an idea.

"It seems to me, the only thing we can do is explain the situation to the editorial department and convince them that Kiririn-shi was the author. As Kyousuke-shi mentioned before, calling by phone merely gets treated as a common complaint. To avoid that, we need to get in direct contact with someone working on the Little Sister Sky project."

- "...Hmph. Thanks for pointing out the obvious. So how are normal middle and high school students supposed to get in contact with someone from the editorial department?"
- "...I do happen to have a connection."

<sup>&</sup>quot;R-really?" I replied in surprise.

Come to think of it, she did say she had seen that publisher's business card before.

Natural curiosity grew within me, so I started to ask for details about this connection, but I stopped once I saw her expression.

Looking troubled, Saori was scratching at her cheek. It looked like she was having trouble saying something.

"...Yes. But it is not all that strong a connection. I cannot exactly say the novel was stolen and directly ask to have something done. I can only use some reason or another to get an appointment at the publisher. Unfortunately, that is all I can do. It seems Kumagai-shi belongs to the second editorial department's mobile publication division, but it would be difficult to get an appointment with that specific division with my connection. I do not directly know anyone in the editorial department."

"No, that's enough. Thanks, Saori. You really are reliable."

I was truly thankful. I may have been the one to ask her, but I felt bad about being that indebted to her. It seemed she did not really want to use this connection.

I bowed my head deeply, but she stuck both hands forward to stop me and said, "Ah ha ha ha. Stop that. You are making me blush."

Saori rubbed the back of my head and suddenly switched over to a serious tone of voice.

"If it gets that kind of response, then it was worth playing the role of Saori Bajeena."

"...Ahn?"

"Hah hah hah. Nothing, just talking to myself."

I decided to let the comment go.

"Okay, I can get us into the publisher, but what do we do then?"

"I have an idea for that. Just leave it to me. ... Heh heh heh. If it goes well, I can create a reason to go to the editorial department not just once, but two or three times."

Hearing that, I felt a chill run down my spine. Kuroneko's thin, eerie smile was similar to the one my little sister had when she handed me an eroge box.

It was evening two days later. Together with Kuroneko this time, I once again headed for the publishing company in Shinjuku.

Saori didn't come. The reason seemed to be related with how she set up an appointment with the publishers for us through her connections, but it seemed to be a difficult topic so I didn't press the issue.

And I didn't need to hear it.

"... So we should just head straight up to the second editorial department on the fourth floor..."

No response, as expected from Kuroneko.

... Well, how do I put it... she was fundamentally the type of person who didn't talk much. By the way, the last time I came here, Kirino had dressed up in a formal suit because she was meeting with the editors, but this time Kuroneko was dressed like usual, head to toe in her black Gothic Lolita fashion.

... Does she not have anything else to wear? That wasn't a question I should ask a girl even if I were wrong, so I didn't say anything, and she could have very well been wearing a different outfit with a similar design...

She kind of acts like some eroge character, doesn't she? Those characters always wear the same clothes too...

As those stupid thoughts were running to my head, I proceeded through the lobby and entered the elevator, going up to the fourth floor.

Coming out of the elevator, I saw paths going to the left and right, with a telephone placed right in front of me.

It seemed that this phone was connected to an inner line that visitors were supposed to use to call the editorial department.

I used the phone while looking at the list that was on the same table as the phone.

"Hello, this is the Dengeki Books Editorial Department."

"Ah, umm... this is Kousaka... I have an appointment at five."

"Understood. Please wait a little while."

"Ah, sorry, I also wanted to ask if this is the second editorial department?"

"Yes, it is indeed. This is the Media Ascii Works Second Editorial Department, Dengeki Books Editorial Division."

So, that means that in the Mobile Division here, there was an editor named Kumagai Ryuunosuke.

Which means we managed to make it to the same department that person was in.

When I put the phone back, before long, a door opened on the left and a bespectacled man appeared. It seemed that he had come to meet us. Following behind him, we walked through a magnificent passageway you would expect to find in a hotel. Going through the innermost door that the man had come out of, we entered a ridiculously wide office space.

"Sorry for intruding..."

... So this was an editorial department? I was curious, so I let my gaze wander around without restraint. To be quite honest, the place was pretty jumbled. They were meticulous in their cleaning, so all the furnishings were spotless, but it was pretty cluttered. Over there were a large number of cardboard boxes, along with a bunch of bishoujo character posters and dolls for decoration. It honestly was an office that reeked of otaku. To be pretty old and have to work in a place like this... you could call it a job, but editors certainly had it rough.

"Please come in and wait in one of these booths."

"Thank you thank you..."

On the left hand side after entering the office there was a corner that had been partitioned off, and in that section were desks that could seat four people. So this was the place they would have business meetings about publishing books...?

As advised by the person who had led us in, we picked the closest booth out of the three that were there and sat down.

I took off my jacket, put down my bag, and drank a mouthful of the tea they had prepared for us.

"Phew..."

Finally, a single breath.

"Ahh, I'm pretty nervous... this is what job interviews must feel like."

I struck up some small talk with the girl next to me, but...

" ...."

Kuroneko looked as pale as a vampire and both her eyes were opened wide. Cold sweat ran profusely down her forehead.

"... H-Hey, Kuroneko. Calm down. Are you alright?"

"... There's no problem."

There so is a problem. She looks like death.

Even though she was the one who suggested this tactic...

"...... Well, I guess it's natural that you're more nervous than I am. Sorry about all this..."

"... I said there wasn't a problem, didn't I? Please do not apologize to me."

Kuroneko closed her eyes halfway, and took one sip of her tea.

"Also, this meeting is being held only under the pretext of us wanting to meet with an editor, so there's not a single reason to be nervous."

Kuroneko mumbled while maintaining an expressionless mask, but I felt she was just putting on an act.

Yes, to make it perfectly clear, today we had come to submit an application.

By application, what I mean is, for example, someone takes them a manga or novel he or she wrote and makes an appeal to try to get them to sell it. The editor reads the work and judges whether it can be used or not, and should the situation permit, gives the applicant advice on how to get the work published, or introduces him or her to another editorial department. Of course, if the work can't be used, the applicant might get verbally abused, driven away, laughed at... that kind of thing.

Even though she had never submitted an application like that, Kuroneko had told me all that.

The office was quieter than I had expected (I had imagined an office in which a frightening editor-in-chief was ranting and raving at his subordinates, in which editors desperately called authors and urged them to turn in their manuscripts... that kind of thing). But, occasionally I could hear what sounded like editors having business meetings with authors over the phone.

And the Mobile Division or whatever was somewhere around here...

Even though Saori had connections, we wouldn't have been able to get in here without at least making up a reason. So, we told them that we were submitting an application to get a work published and successfully infiltrated the office.

In a word, we were on a scouting mission. Let me explain it simply one more time.

We had passed into the "Second Editorial Department, Dengeki Books Editorial Division."

The place "Kumagai Ryuunosuke" worked was the "Second Editorial Department, Mobile Division."

These two were different divisions that belonged to the same editorial department, and the one we were interested in was the latter.

The genre of the work that Kuroneko created seemed to mesh relatively well with Dengeki Books, so under that pretext, Saori had been able to get us to the Dengeki Books Editorial Division. If possible, I wanted to ask the editor we were going to meet to allow us to have a meeting with Kumagai Ryuunosuke, but...

This wasn't a trick we could keep on doing, so I was all the more nervous.

"By the way, you don't seem to have anything here, so what are you making your application with?"

"... I already mailed it in. My application this time was for a novel, so it wouldn't make sense to bring it in and expect him to read it in the same day, right?"

Ahh, I see. That's certainly true.

That one... she was going to make a professional editor read that novel that Kirino had spent so much time bashing...?

W-Will this really be alright...? And that... wasn't the only thing I was worried about...

"... Let me just say it. You're dealing with someone who's meeting with you as part of work. So don't treat this as if you're casually talking with a friend or something, alright?"

Because your mouth is every bit as nasty as Kirino's.

"... Tch..... you don't have to tell me that. I already know."

Kuroneko gently covered her face with one hand, and then suddenly flicked her arm to the side.

When she did that... her red eyes had turned black.

"... Camouflage complete... is this character and tone of voice more acceptable?"

What was up with her attitude, as if she was trying to say "I have assumed a character that is more appropriate for human negotiations"?

All she did was take out her color contacts very quickly, right? Pretty handy trick there.

"Do you really understand...?"

But there was no time to confirm that. A new person had entered the booth.

It was a guy who had a white towel wrapped around his head in the style of a pirate bandana. He wore a warm-looking fleece hooded sweatshirt, and rather than seeming like a company employee, he looked like someone who would be working stage crew during a show.

"Ahh, I'm really sorry! The editor who's handling your case still hasn't come in today! I really do apologize, but would you mind waiting another fifteen minutes or so?"

"... Ah... I don't mind."

"Ah, really? I'm honestly terribly sorry! Feel free to leaf through a few of the magazines over there while you're waiting!"

From the time he came in, all he did was apologize. He seemed like an incredibly humble person.

And then, even though he told us to read some of the magazines, he went and comfortably sat himself across from us.

"But nice to meet you, my name is Henkutsu. I'm just a lowly editor here."

"Ahh... Henkutsu-san...?"

"Haha, it's a strange name, isn't it? Our editorial department gives each and every one of its editors pet names... nicknames, I should say. It's become customary that we call each other by those names."

It was like a custom straight out of a secret evil organization in a superhero series. Alright, remind me to never apply here for a job.

"By the way, you two sure have some strange connections. Our department generally doesn't deal with applications made by amateurs. We only handle applications just occasionally from semi-pros or pros. And the work you sent to us was a doujinshi derivative of a preexisting series, so this situation is honestly quite unprecedented."

"Ahh."

For a while now, all I've been saying is "Ahh." Wait, so this guy also read the doujinshi?

"Well, that company does help us out a great deal with our related goods. Like, for instance, those things over there are good examples."

Henkutsu-san vaguely gestured with one hand to the "things over there."

Even if you say that... it's not like I know which things you're talking about. For Henkutsu-san, he was probably speaking under the assumption that we were well informed about "that company" or whatever, and so it was unavoidable that he would be difficult to understand.

Anyhow, I never asked him about "that company." Why, you ask? Because Saori didn't seem to want to talk much about the connections she had.

Kuroneko didn't ask anything either. Or rather, she hadn't said a single word since Henkutsu-san had shown up.

"So, after that we decided that we would just read your work and meet with you and see how things went."

Well, he was a pretty blunt person, wasn't he?

"This is just my personal opinion, but I thought it was pretty interesting. What you sent us was a so-called "time travel" Maschera doujinshi, right? I personally am a fan of Maschera, and I'm relatively knowledgeable about plot elements in derivative novels like "time travel" and "alternate universe," so I can't deny that I may be somewhat biased in my opinion here. There were certainly a lot of words you made up, and places that were difficult to understand. I had read your setup notes so I didn't have a hard time at all, but it would be good for you to remember that there will be many people who don't feel the same way."

"Ahh..."

Hey, pretty good, Kuroneko. He certainly added on a lot of annoying things at the end there, but a professional editor thought your book was interesting.

When I glanced at Kuroneko, she had a bit of a blush on her cheeks while still retaining her emotionless mask. She probably wasn't completely dissatisfied with his comments. Of course, our visit today was primarily concerned with contacting the people involved with Maisora, Kumagai Ryuunosuke in particular, and Kuroneko's application was to the very end just the pretext under which we came.

But if Kuroneko could also get her work assessed like this, that was a good thing too.

"Ah, also, they never told me what kind of people would be coming, and I'm surprised at how young you two are. And what's more, I didn't expect two people to show up."

"Ahh."

"Umm, did you both have a hand in the project? The doujinshi you sent us had a manga and a novel portion. So perhaps one of you was in charge of the original story?"

"No, that's-"

I'm just accompanying her... is what I wanted to say, but Kuroneko cut me off.

"Yes. We're brother and sister and wrote it together."

"Wha-...?! Hey, you-"

In my surprise, I began to protest, but Kuroneko slapped a hand over my mouth.

Her expressionless face and black eyes stared right up at me.

"Isn't that right... oniisan?"

"....?!?!"

When had we decided on this setup?! Nobody told me anything!!

I sent Kuroneko a resentful look, but we couldn't take back what was already said.

Whatever may happen, we had to stick to this story. I turned my gaze back front.

"Yes. We wrote it together."

"So, who did what?"

Even if you ask that... honestly, Kuroneko was the one who wrote the entire thing, so how exactly should I answer?

I scratched my head and hesitated, but Kuroneko nonchalantly answered.

"Niisan thought of the setup. For example, the special move names and such..."

"So for example, this 'Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust'?"

"Yes. He said he had put his all into that name."

I definitely did not! That's just your own opinion about it, isn't it?!

Kuroneko vaguely glanced in my direction.

"In truth, the manga and novel were written by me, but the setup notes niisan made were very important to the work. So, I can say that we both wrote it."

Dammit! What's with that haughty facial expression, as if she's bestowing some great honor on me...?! Thanks but no thanks!

Also, wait... so I'm the person she claims wrote that thick set of notes? I hadn't read the notes at all, but didn't Kirino trash that thing, saying that it was embarrassing and jokingly comparing it to something like a book of sorcery?

I don't know about this...

"Ah... I'm not too sure about that 'Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust' line..."

See?! The editor looks completely bewildered!

Having been softly criticized, Kuroneko seemed displeased and scowled. But she still tried to smooth things over with her next question.

"... Well, Henkutsu-san, what name would you give to this special move?"

"Ahh, hmm..."

Henkutsu-san crossed his arms and thought about it for a few seconds.

"How about 'Pure Magic Destructive Killing Wave'?"

... That didn't seem to be all that different of a name.

No, I apologize. I'm just a novice at this, so I might not really know what I'm talking about...

Afterwards, Kuroneko and the editor talked for a bit about the naming (even though all the names they came up with honestly sounded the same to me). The discussion didn't seem to be going anywhere (that was just my personal opinion though), so I wanted to suggest that we start looking into

the Maisora issue before the other editor showed up, but Kuroneko seemed to have really gotten into her conversation with Henkutsu-san, so I couldn't get a word in edgewise and I couldn't really look around without her.

And then, the conversation stopped for a moment, so I took the opportunity to forcibly steer the conversation back onto something more productive.

"Umm, so what kind of person is the editor that will be meeting with us today?"

"Eh? A-Ahh... in this department we call him 'Puurin."

"Sounds like a pretty cute name."

It was probably a female editor, then. An image of a plump office lady (with huge breasts) came to mind.

"That's what it seems like, right? Hahaha, but that's completely off the mark. Once you see the real thing, you'll be really surprised."

"Ahh."

"... How will we be surprised?"

Kuroneko cocked her head to the side.

"Fufu, well..."

Henkutsu-san put up a finger and looked as if he was about to launch into a ghost story, and suddenly began to speak in a low voice.

At the same time, someone appeared behind him.

"He looks just like Akuma from Street Fighter."

"... Sorry for being late. I'm Puurin. Nice to meet you."

He introduced himself with a deep voice. What incredible timing that was.

Having realized that his comment was overheard, Henkutsu half jumped with an "Uwaahhh!" and looked over his shoulder, quickly lowering his head.

"I'm sorry! I didn't think you would be behind me like that!"

"... No, it's fine, people always say that about me."

He was an elderly man. His white hair was arranged in waves on top of his head, looking almost like flames.

Just like Henkutsu-san had said, he looked quite like the hidden character from the Capcom one-on-one fighter. It was a famous character even I knew.

He had deep-set eyes, his face was solemnly wrinkled, and his skin was dark. But unlike Akuma, he was incredibly thin. He was almost sickly thin, but his eyes were sharp, so he gave off quite a horrifying impression.

My father also looked pretty terrifying, but this person... and this might be really rude of me to say... but this person exuded an inhumanly sinister atmosphere from his entire body.

To be frank, I could feel waves of killing intent coming off him.

And even then, his name was Puurin. Puurin... what the hell? Who exactly would have attached that cute of a name to this person? It couldn't be that he thought of it himself, right?

"... Hello, I'm Kousaka. Nice to meet you."

"... Nice to meet you."

Both Kuroneko and I were a bit taken aback by this warlock with such a cute name, but for now at least we safely completed our opening greetings.

And then Puurin-san responded with a heavy voice that surely emanated from the depths of hell. "... Yes," he nodded.

Henkutsu-san stood up, switching positions with Puurin-san.

"Well, I'll just return to work then... good luck!"

With that final word of encouragement, Henkutsu-san hastily ran away.

Eh? Seriously? That just leaves us alone with... w-we're supposed to just talk with Puurin-san? Wait just a second! Don't just abandon us here! Why does it feel like we've been left on a sacrificial altar?!

"... Something wrong? \*stare\*"

"N-Nothing! \*shock\*"

The minute our eyes met, I looked away. Uwah, this isn't good, is it? We were supposed to get information about Maisora and Kumagai Ryuunosuke out of this clearly reticent, difficult-seeming person?

No way! We're done for! If I knew this was going to happen, I would have much rather have brought up the issue at hand while the good-natured Henkutsu-san was still here. Crap, what should we do...?

When I looked to the side in bewilderment, this time I met with Kuroneko's gaze. Probably for the same reason as I had, Kuroneko was also looking to the side. It seemed that even Kuroneko had a hard time meeting Puurin-san's gaze straight on.

"... We have to do what we came here to do."

Kuroneko mumbled, almost as if she was talking to herself. She then resolved herself, faced front, and nervously broke the ice.

- "... Umm, did you happen to read the doujinshi I sent you the other day?"
- "... I read it. As well as the setting notes."

Puurin-san's words were clear and concise. Kuroneko's manner of speaking was quite gloomy, so listening to these two talk didn't give me a cheerful feeling. I could almost see a black aura rising from the booth. In this case, two negatives did not make a positive.

"Here are copies of the manuscript and the setting notes."

Puurin-san stacked up bundles of A4-size papers onto the desk. There were three stacks of the thick papers, each held together by a separate clip.

... There was a stack for me too? ... But I really never read any of this.

I looked down at the bundle of papers that was passed to me, and felt just a bit awkward. It's a bit late to be saying this, but I really should have read this before coming.

Puurin-san began to read the memo that was on top of his desk. It was something Henkutsu-san had written and left behind.

"Brother and sister wrote it together... The main writer is the little sister, and her penname is 'Kuroneko.' ... Is that correct?"

"Kuroneko-san, are you aiming to become a novelist? The doujinshi I received also had a manga portion though..."

From the start, Puurin-san barely looked at me, and focused his attention on Kuroneko.

To a pro, it may have been obvious that I was just an extra here at this meeting.

"... |..."

Kuroneko grasped the hem of her skirt tightly and hung her head.

Even though she spoke a bit clumsily, she spoke from the heart.

"... I like writing stories and drawing. So much so, that if possible, I want to be able to do both as a job... but, today I'm making an application for a novel."

"I understand. So, would it be correct to say that right now, you are aiming to debut your work with our firm?"

"Yes."

"I see... well, allow me to speak with that in mind then."

His tone was completely indifferent as he continued talking. It almost felt like a medical interview.

"What amateur novelist competitions have you applied to?"

"I apply for your company's competition every year."

"How many years have you applied? Have you applied for any other competitions?"

"I've applied for three years. Other than your company, I've also applied for the MF and SD competitions every year, but I've never made it to the final round."

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	1 300.	That 5	quite	IIIIhiessive	for someone	so young.

"... Ah, thank you very much."

..... This is uncomfortable.

What was with this heavy, gloomy atmosphere? Henkutsu-san, come back, I'm begging you.

Feeling intolerably restless, I glanced around. The other booths were separated by a partition, the wall being made of cabinets and cardboard boxes, so I couldn't get a glimpse at what was happening in the office.

The area we were in was in the dead center of the office, but felt more like a private room.

Perhaps because our opponent looked so scary this time, I felt as if I was locked up in an interrogation room.

"It's quite unusual for someone so young to apply every year like that. Do you have any special motive for applying?"

"... It's like I said before, that I really want to write stories... but honestly speaking, I also want to earn money. Income from book royalties would be much higher than what I'm earning at my part-time job right now, so if I could make a good debut, I could make a good amount of money for my family."

This was the first time I had heard about Kuroneko's motivations. I remember she had told me at summer Comiket that she secretly had a part-time job, but... their family might not be very well off. Going to school, having a part-time job, trying hard at her hobbies... whether Kirino or Kuroneko, I found myself surrounded by exceptional younger people. As the older person, I really should learn from them.

"... Do you think that reason is selfish?"

Kuroneko asked in a bit of a worried voice, and Puurin-san frowned in silence for a while before finally speaking.

"No."

And that's all he said. It really appeared to me that Puurin-san had seemed to be angry at something ever since he came into the booth.

Was it because Henkutsu-san had said he looked like Akuma? Ugh, he really had gone too far.

The talk continued in this stifling, heavy atmosphere... and at last we arrived at the main issue of Kuroneko's application.

"So... about the manuscript I read..."

Thump thump. I felt like I could hear the sound of Kuroneko's heart beating out her chest.

"We won't be able to use it for a publication."

Puurin-san denied Kuroneko candidly, with a tone of finality.

"This goes without saying, but you haven't been able to get through the rookie competition, so there's no reason we would be able to publish your work. The reason I'm speaking with you here in the first place is because I am fulfilling an obligation to someone who we are indebted towards. This may sound harsh, but just because you're well connected doesn't mean we can treat you any differently. If we did, then that would be doing a disservice towards the people who apply for our firm's rookie award."

"... I understand. I apologize for taking up so much of your time."

Kuroneko apologized timidly. Hearing her words, I felt a sick sensation in my gut.

I mean, the reason Kuroneko was here was at my request, for the sake of Kirino.

I understand where Puurin-san was coming from for being a bit hostile thinking that Kuroneko had forced this appointment because of her connections, but that blame should have been placed on my shoulders. But I couldn't say that here.

Because then, all Kuroneko's efforts might just go to waste.

"This is the last time we will meet with you because of your connections. Next time, please send your manuscript directly into the competition. Like everyone else... now, about what you have written..."

"					Yes	١	"
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"... There were certainly some interesting points in the character dialogues. I especially thought this Kirino original character was good... After I read it, I really was turned on by this Kirino-tan ... she was very moe moe, yes."

This damn old man. What the hell are you calling moe moe at an age like yours? What exactly are you saying looking like that and sounding like

that... although, I understood that it was his job. That character was modeled off my little sister, you know. Dammit, and just when I thought I had forgotten... wasn't there a scene in which that character became a sex slave? Kuroneko, dammit, don't use that for your application, you asshole.

"... I... don't really like that character though..."

"... I see. That's quite unfortunate. On the contrary, I found all the characters other than Kirino-tan quite terrible. I also think you tried to jam too many elements into the setup. Working out a setup is definitely not a bad thing, but you don't seem to have gotten the hang of it. The organization was a mess and the descriptions were way too dense, and it comes off as a prototypical wannabe novel in a bad way... I'm doubtful a manuscript on this level could even get through the preliminaries. Even bearing in mind that this work is based off something else, the craftsmanship is just awful. It is not even close to something we could sell on the market."

As the severe criticisms rolled in one after the other, Kuroneko paled even further than she usually was.

At first, she countered each of his points, with a "But, if I change that..." or with a "That's not right..." or with a "... The 'dark force' is a very important element of my original world...," but she was shot down each time with his relentless logic, with a "The only person who feels that way is you, and to the readers it isn't important at all. It's just something that makes everything difficult to read," or a "using your writing as a method of self-expression is perfectly fine, but aren't there things you should worry about before getting to that point?"... so her will to resist slowly vanished.

"... And those are my general comments on the work. Next I'll go into the finer details... if I may, I will start in order from page one, so please follow along in the copies you have."

This time, Puurin-san flipped through the doujinshi page by page, droning on and on about each and every little thing he found wrong with the book. The copy of the manuscript he was referencing had been marked completely red by a pen on each and every page.

D-Don't tell me that all that writing was there to mark out the "bad parts" of Kuroneko's novel... and if so, he was planning on going through each and every comment...?

The fault-finding session continued for what seemed like an eternity. We were dealing with a seasoned professional here, so Kuroneko and I had no choice but to sit through this one-sided consultation.

... Ten minutes had passed, and then twenty.

... And then an hour... and then three hours... and finally...

Staring fixedly at the ground and listening to the harsh criticism, Kuroneko's expression, for the first time since I've met her, warped in frustration.

"...... sob..... hngh......"

"Don't make my little sister cry, you asshole! Isn't there a better way you can say things?! No matter how you look at it, what you're doing now is just too cruel, isn't it?! You're talking to a junior high school girl, you know!!"

The minute I heard Kuroneko crying, I felt myself bursting with anger. I had yelled out half-unconsciously.

I also stood up forcefully, and slammed a fist down vigorously onto the table.

"...."

But Puurin-san didn't seem the least perturbed by my yelling. Wordlessly, he began to wipe up the tea that had been spilled on the table by the force of my fist.

Seeing him do that, I suddenly came back to my senses. I had shouted quite loudly, so the people outside were probably curious about what had happened. I heard people chattering all around me, and the people having business meetings in neighboring booths were discreetly peeping in to see what was going on.

I felt absolutely horrible. When the thought occurred that I might have made Kuroneko feel the same way, I really just wanted to vanish.

" .....

Ahhh crap, seriously... I had acted just like a child there, hadn't I? That's embarrassing. What rude things did I just say to the person who had so kindly taken time out of his work schedule to meet with us? He could have probably put what he was saying differently, but it's not like I could tell him to not criticize things he thought were bad. It wouldn't be good advice if he were being lenient. I wasn't talking to a schoolteacher or my father here. I was talking to this man about business on equal footing, and he was telling us how to do things. He was being serious and sincere, and it was natural that we sit here and just listen.

... But how was I supposed to just bear with all that?!

To be told with a single stroke that something you had lovingly crafted was not something they could use... even though I knew he had a point, it was just way too cruel.

And this girl was the same as Kirino. She had worked out this thick set of setup notes, thinking about what characters would say what kinds of things, and I was certain that she had put her all into it.

To think that-

"Niisan."

Still seething with resentment, I heard Kuroneko's kind voice admonishing me from the side. It was the same gentle tone she used when talking about her own little sister. As I stood there, she pinched my sleeve and tugged.

It seemed she wanted me to sit back down.

Briskly rubbing the tears off her face with her sleeve, she looked up at me with wet eyes.

"... It's fine... thanks for getting angry for me."

"... I-I see..."

I was captivated by her teary face... o-oh right, I forgot that she's also pretty attractive. It's not something I'm aware of normally, so it had slipped my mind. Her half-crying expression was incredibly charming, so I couldn't help but think weird thoughts despite the situation we were in... but to think seeing a girl's crying face would get my heart beating so fast... it was probably a problem with my personality. And she was a junior high school student for Christ's sake.

"... I apologize. When it comes to his sister, sometimes niisan's head goes funny."

"Umm... I also apologize. Yelling out so suddenly like that..."

H-Hey. My head didn't go funny at all though... even as I thought that, I followed Kuroneko's lead and lowered my head.

"... It's fine, I don't mind."

Fortunately, Puurin-san seemed to forgive us. Rather, he seemed completely composed.

"Shall we take a short break?"

... Puurin-san stood up from his seat, and spoke with a voice that didn't reveal an ounce of what he was feeling. He held a wet handkerchief in one hand, so he might be going to deal with that.

"..... Um, I'm sorry."

Sounding more down than I had ever heard her, Kuroneko muttered. This was also the first time I had seen her act so sincerely.

"... Because of me, it's become very difficult for us to get any information regarding Kumagai Ryuunosuke..."

"No, I'm sorry too... it was my request that led to things getting like this... I apologize."

We exchanged apologies. We used words from the heart that would not have come out if it had not been for a situation like this.

I felt strange. We had very seldom talked to each other in the past, but we had come to a strange sense of mutual understanding. What exactly was this weird feeling of camaraderie?

This awkward, unpleasant silence continued for a while.

Finally, Puurin-san came back. For some reason, he was holding a tray.

"Please."

Concisely speaking just that one word, Puurin-san placed some new cups of tea and pudding on the desk.

"Please eat."

"... Ah."

What was up with him...? What exactly does he want to do...? Is he... not angry with us?

While we sat there completely puzzled, Puurin-san calmly sat down in front of us. With his usual warlock-like expression, he spooned up a bite of pudding and sent it into his mouth. Bite, chew chew, gulp.

... He nodded, seemingly content.

"The pudding is good. It'll cheer you up."

......... Huh? I turned and met Kuroneko's gaze. Could it be, that this person was...

- "... Are you trying to cheer us up?"
- "... Chatting really isn't one of my strong suits... sorry."

Griiinnnnn. A rather repulsive looking light smile appeared on Puurin-san's face. It was a look that could make children swoon... but I'll just interpret his actions as trying to cheer us up.

Yes... this person's criticisms were incredibly harsh, and he also looked absurdly scary, but he wasn't such a bad guy. He really wasn't a bad person...

"Haha... could it be... you like pudding, so they call you Puurin-san?"

- "... Yeah... well, it's because pudding looks like breasts to me."
- ...Well, he's just a hentai old man.

Puurin-san tapped on the plate with the pudding on it with a finger, and watched the pudding wobble back and forth, seeming fully satisfied.

"... Don't you feel at ease when you do this? Our company president has a policy, he recommends that you eat your pudding while tapping on the plate five times every ten seconds."

If this wasn't some ploy to get us to relax, this company was seriously deranged.

(Whisper) "... N-Niisan... he's completely nuts..."

(Whisper) "... Shh, don't let him hear you..."

Kuroneko and I whispered to each other as we watched this almost cult-like hentai ceremony happening in front of our eyes.

To be honest, we were quite taken aback... but just looking at the results of what had happened, I could see that the previously incredibly heavy atmosphere had improved by quite a lot. So... I decided to interpret this as Puurin-san's way of being considerate, seeing as he wasn't great with words. Or should I say, that's what I wanted to believe.

Taking much longer than we had, Puurin-san tasted his pudding at a leisurely pace, finally clapping his hands together with a "Thanks for the meal."

"Well, before we continue where we left off, let's talk a bit about what you'll do from here."

"... What... I'll do... from here ...?"

Kuroneko put herself on guard, and I understood why. She was probably worried about what he was going to say this time.

"Yes, from here... in other words, with regards to your next project."

"Eh ...? Next?"

Kuroneko widened her eyes and repeated his statement as a question.

"Umm... but you told me you couldn't use what I gave you, and this was the last time we would meet because of my connections..."

"Yes. From what I read of your manuscript, I am unable to take you on as your editor. As I said before, if you really want to debut with our firm, get your manuscript through our company's rookie competition. Without using your connections, in the usual established way. Not doing that would be quite sneaky."

"... I understand."

It was the same verbal exchange as before... or so I thought, but Puurin-san continued with a "But..."

"I would welcome any additional manuscripts you send to me. Please understand that I would only be giving you advice on it, and I wouldn't help you more than that, and I wouldn't be helping you get it published. But if

you want... or rather, before that, if you're not fed up after today's session..."

If you're prepared to get heavily criticized once more, please come again.

That's what he appeared to be saying.

Kuroneko took one deep breath, and nodded with an "... Alright."

"... I look forward to working with you."

"... Yes, me too. It's just that, to say the least, the way you are now, things would be out of the question, so please don't get your hopes up too much. I would ask that you do not neglect your schoolwork or other things and misunderstand this situation as your being accepted by an editor. There really are very few people who can successfully debut, and speaking from the experience I have with the authors that work with me... there are people who will take ten years between the time they are accepted by an editor and the time they actually debut their work. And then, even though they work so hard to debut like that, if their work doesn't sell they will just fade back into obscurity... so please, make sure your own life is your top priority."

Almost like he was warning Kuroneko, Puurin-san repeated his blunt words, and at the end even lowered his head.

.... So... in a word...

"... So, you're trying to tell me that the probability of me debuting with your company is rather low?"

"Yes, exactly."

He said yes! Even though he had just made her cry a little while ago! It really seems like "subtlety" is not in this old man's dictionary!

"And... that's not the only thing I want to say. I don't know if this is putting it correctly... but, to so called "wannabes" like Kuroneko-san, debuting comes first and foremost. Of course, that's not an incorrect way of thinking. But, from our standpoint, debuting is the beginning. It's not the goal."

All in one breath.

"After you debut, things will be different than when you were an amateur. Deadlines spring up, new information and material pop up and you have to

craft new stories using those. There will even be times where you don't even have time to absorb all this new information but you'll still just have to keep on writing. The one thing that you can depend on at times like those are the experiences you've gained through life. Even if you take a detour along the way... for example, if you found something else you wanted to do, and decided to pursue that for a while, the experience you gain there is definitely not useless. This probably sounds rather extreme and these might be words that would anger most novelist hopefuls... but you should pursue some other line of work until you retire, and then debut as a novelist with your wealth of life experience. Even if you did things like that, you wouldn't be late to the game."

That is certainly quite extreme. As expected, the old man suggested the easygoing route.

Even though she wants to become a novelist now, he talked about doing something forty years down the line. And also, this is something I've been thinking up to now, not only does this guy sound like he's giving us a lecture, but he's terribly longwinded. But, he seemed to be honestly trying to be sincere and considerate, and I could tell that he was speaking seriously. This was also what he did as a job, so there wasn't really a reason he would be lecturing us. Well, annoying things are annoying, so I found myself almost wishing he would drop dead from a heart attack right now... but it might not be a bad idea to have some faith in him, I think.

Puurin-san looked Kuroneko in the eyes as he spoke onwards.

"What I just said... did you take it as me trying to get you to give up your dream of becoming a novelist?"

"Yes, I feel like you're lecturing and patronizing me, saying something like 'You should listen to my advice when I say that you should try doing something else. Because you have no talent.' It's quite unpleasant."

Did this bitch just say "yes" straight out?! And what's more, she felt unpleasant because he was being patronizing?! Certainly, I sort of agreed with her, but that's not something you can say out loud! Why do you have to speak so aggressively no matter who you're talking to?! What happened to the girl who was sitting here and quietly negotiating with him?! Did she die or something?!

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hahaha, patronizing and unpleasant, hm?"

At Kuroneko's tactless remarks, Puurin-san raised his voice for the first time and laughed.

He looked seriously scary. Did her words anger him...?

"Ah, but I'm sorry. Certainly, I probably sounded like I was lecturing you. Looking like this and being this old, there aren't many people who would say something like that to me, so it's difficult for me to realize when I'm being that way."

"Not surprising."

Kuroneko's poisonous mouth just kept on going. She's completely returned back to her old personality, hasn't she?

"Yeah. Well, while I'm here lecturing and patronizing you, let me give you the punchline. Kuroneko-san, please realize that your time as a 'wannabe' is very precious. Whether or not you end up debuting with our company, it's good that you have things that would make you want to go and earn money. In your case, there are other things that you want to do just as much as this, right? You're still young, so go have various experiences, see various things, and enjoy your life. I think that's a good shortcut to becoming a novelist. You don't have to be in such a hurry. It's a matter of your own future, so please think about it slowly and carefully."

"... Thank you for your opinion. I will try my best."

She said that really sarcastically... well, that's fine and all, but it's not doing wonders for my nerves.

"Yes, please try your best. It's good to listen to the advice of those older than you."

Puurin-san didn't seem like he wanted to give up and replied to Kuroneko. And then...

"Well, let me give you this. It's my email address and cell phone number. Please use this to contact me."

He took a business card out from his bag. When Kuroneko took the card from him, her eyes widened.

"N-Niisan, this is..."

"W-What's wrong?"

At Kuroneko's strange expression, I put myself on my guard and stared at the lettering on the business card.

MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department, Dengeki Books Editorial Division...

"Eh...? Wait... t-this name..."

Swish! Swish! Becoming more and more bewildered, I looked back and forth between the business card and the editor in front of me.

"... Ah, sorry, did I confuse you?"

And then, Puurin-san, seeming to misunderstand why we were surprised...

"... Let me clear that up. My real name is Kumagai Ryuunosuke... Nice to meet you."

He offered that simple explanation as to why the name he gave us was different from the name on his business card.

It was a few days later. We were in a Media Ascii Works conference room. On the fifth-floor of the building... in other words, right above where the Second Editorial Department was. We were sitting on a sofa that surrounded the long table in the room. There were decorative plants placed in the corners of the room that gave the room just a bit of color. It was a simple, plain reception area. According to Puurin-san, it was a room intended for large meetings or magazine interviews.

Along the fifth floor hallway, conference rooms like this were lined up one after the other like karaoke rooms.

We were in just one of those conference rooms. Only Kuroneko and I were here, sitting side by side on the sofa and waiting for the appointed time.

Perhaps it was the fault of the soundproof walls, but the interior of the room was dead silent. It almost made my ears hurt.

"You know, you really didn't have to come."

"... Niisan. That's the third time you've said that."

Kuroneko faced front, and spoke without even sending a glance in my direction... also, even though nobody else was here, she continued to faithfully call me "niisan." My real little sister didn't even call me that, so each time she said that I felt a bit embarrassed...

"The ship has already set sail. Or do you intend to leave me out at the end after having me accompany you up until now?"

"That's not what I'm trying to do..."

"Also, I detest people who can cause me to go through such unpleasant things. So I want to be here and relish in the moment when they fire this person... you won't mind if I kick them a bit too, right?"

"I do mind. Stop it."

Her words were filled with pronounced weariness and hateful resentment.

As I suspected, having been subjected to such harsh criticism for over four hours was still grating on her nerves.

That previous meeting was just a bit... Even I, who was just listening as an innocent bystander, couldn't get his voice out of my head, and even had a dream about it that night. Did all editors treat everyone so harshly during business meetings?

This segment here just won't do; you should fix this part here; also, this part is not good either...

It was just so annoying~~! Idiot! Was there anything you didn't think was bad?! Dammit! If you're going to be like that, why don't you just write the damn thing?! I really wanted to just throw the manuscript at his face.

But I didn't.

Well, it's not like it's possible to make something that would please everyone.

That was true no matter what you were, whether you were a police officer, a Japanese sweets maker, or a novelist.

... Well, there's still a bit of time left, so let me explain what's going on right now.

Puurin-san was precisely the person we had been searching for, Kumagai Ryuunosuke.

Call it fortunate if you want, but once Kuroneko had finished badmouthing him, I decided to just explain the situation to him directly. About the other reason we had come to the editorial department.

When I showed him the business card we had brought with us, that of Kumagai Ryuunosuke, Puurin-san aka Kumagai confirmed that it was indeed his card. It seemed that he had a different set of business cards for the Dengeki Books Editorial Department and the Mobile Division. It also seemed that the Mobile Division was created for the sake of public image, and that the staff belonging to it was essentially the same as the staff at the Dengeki Books Editorial Department. They operated out of the same place, and the same editors worked there.

That explanation might have been a bit difficult to understand, so I'll just repeat what Kumagai-san had told us verbatim...

"This is quite a complex matter I suppose, but if I had to explain it, I would say that it's a strategy to maintain our public image. The target audience for cell phone novels is young women, so we have to try to hide the moe moe sides of the business. So, the mobile division might have the same staff as Dengeki Books, but we say to the public that it's a separate department. The public homepages of the two departments also don't mention each other. That's why we use different business cards for each side of the business... I apologize if that confused you."

That's how he explained it. I had been agonizing over how to find a way to Kumagai Ryuunosuke in the Mobile Division from the meeting with the Dengeki Books editor we had snagged with the help of Saori's connections, but... it turned out that the person we met was Kumagai Ryuunosuke himself. What's more, the Kumagai Ryuunosuke we met was a scary-looking old man, and bore not the slightest resemblance to the elite-looking, suit-wearing Kumagai Ryuunosuke that Kirino had met.

So the person Kirino had met really might have been an imposter. That realization really raised goose bumps on our flesh.

"By the way, where did you get that card?"

"Umm, before that, there's something I wanted to ask you..."

I quickly turned the conversation to the topic of Maisora, what we had originally come to talk about. It's just that... well, everyone already knows this all too well, but I was quite a chicken. So I didn't immediately broach

the topic of plagiarism, instead just asking a few questions about "Rino," the alleged author of Maisora.

"Ahh, Rino-sensei? To be honest, the one I was talking about before, the one that worked hard for ten years to finally debut with us, that's Rino-sensei. After she switched recently to writing cell phone novels, her writing got much more interesting... it's like she was completely different person. I honestly was quite moved that someone like that had the talent to write something like this. You could say I was shocked. Maybe it was my own incompetence for not realizing she had this much talent even though I was in charge of her for so long... seriously... I was surprised... and regretful... dear me, this is just an editor's intuition, but I have a feeling that the novel is going to become quite popular."

Kumagai-san spoke passionately and confidently. He was probably excited that someone he was managing for so long was finally beginning a brilliant debut.

Well, it was pretty clear by now I think. This "Rino" was undoubtedly the mastermind behind this plagiarism scheme.

"What was the matter with Rino-sensei?

"... Ahh, well, that is..."

Ah, it's almost time. Let's end the recollection here, and the rest I'll explain bit by bit later.

The conference room door opened, and Kumagai-san appeared. A single person entered the room after him.

Once that other person realized we were sitting on the couch, she blinked.

"Hm?"

It wasn't easy to tell she was a girl from her voice, but her voice definitely carried well. She was wearing a pair of deep blue pant suits, and her hair was short. There was a beauty mark under her left eye, and she looked like she was in her mid-20s. She was quite tall for a girl, and she almost had no breasts at all. If she wiped off her makeup and took off her earrings, it wouldn't be difficult to mistake her for a pretty-looking boy. She was wearing feminine clothing though, and so she gave off the air of being a secretary to a company president or something.

"Hey, Kumagai-san, I thought today we were having a business meeting to discuss the second volume of Maisora? Ah, maybe we have the wrong room?"

"No, this is the right room. Let me introduce Kousaka-san and Kuroneko-san. They have something important to tell Fate-chan."

## F-Fate-chan?

"Hey, Kumagai-san, I told you to stop calling me Fate-chan~. I'm writing under the penname 'Rino' now, so like I told you before, call me that from now on."

... It seemed that this was "Rino." And she seemed to have no problems asking other people to call her that... and right in front of me, no less... the image of my little sister sick in bed popped up in my head and I felt my insides coming to a boil.

Although, it probably wasn't a good idea to openly get angry at this stage of the game.

Pushing down my anger, I stood up and greeted her.

"Nice to meet you."

"... Nice to meet you."

Next to me, Kuroneko followed my lead. This girl called Fate-chan (I really didn't want to call her Rino) looked baffled as she returned our greetings.

"Ahh, hello... nice to meet you. I'm Rino... hmm? Kumagai-san?"

"Well well, let's just sit down for a bit, and you should listen to what these two have to say."

"... I don't mind, I guess. Ah, I see, they want to find out more about me, right? I just got out of an interview though... so, what? Are these fans that have read the web version of the book?"

That's how she seemed to be interpreting the situation. Suddenly cheering up, she sat across from us. By the way, through all this, Kumagai-san remained standing by the entrance, emitting dark waves of menace.

"Well, nice to meet you two, then. Are you two siblings? Your little sister is quite cute."

"... Ahh, well, yes, we are."

Would I be able to break her composure in the allotted time I had agreed upon with Kumagai-san? For now, we had come with a plan, but it wasn't a plan that I was absolutely certain would succeed. Whether or not we would be able to get Kirino's novel back depended on how we fought this battle.

Kuroneko made the first move.

"... Can I just ask you one thing?"

"Of course! What is it?"

She responded in a cheerful voice. She seemed to have entered into her fan-pandering mode.

Kuroneko opened her mouth. I wondered what angle she would attack from, but...

"What kind of name is Fate-chan?"

Really? From that angle? ... Although, it was something I was curious about too.

Schhhlp! The girl's face tightened up incredibly quickly. Panicked, she quickly tried to recover, but the smile she showed us was incredibly stiff. It seemed like a question that was hard for her to answer. Well, serves you right.

"... It's my middle name. My full name is 'Iori Fate Setsuna'..."

"... So you mean, it was your former penname?"

Kuroneko was baiting her. Well, let's see how she answers that...

"I-It's my real name."

What... did she say...?

"... What did you say just now?"

"lori Fate Setsuna' is my real name, I said...! Terrible, isn't it?! It's a name that shows up a lot in anime and light novels, isn't it?! But what can I do when my parents decide to name me like that...?! I'm only three-quarters Japanese! I also think it's an embarrassing name... s-so, enough with that!"

"... I think it's a cool name though..."

You're actually being serious, aren't you? Don't look so jealous.

Kuroneko's eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed, and her breathing became ragged. The name Iori Fate Setsuna seemed to really tug at her heartstrings.

"... Can I call you Fate-chan?"

"No! D-Didn't you listen to a word I said?!"

This girl seriously had a talent for annoying people. She wasn't even trying to provoke her, but it just came naturally. Well, I got a bit of a kick out of it this time though.

In fact, just do it more.

"Ugh... I told Kumagai-san already, but please call me 'Rino.' I'm publishing a book under that name, after all."

"That's impossible. I can't call you 'Rino.""

Just baiting her along wouldn't lead us anywhere, so it was time to get down to business. I spoke to Fate.

"Because you aren't the author of 'Maisora.""

"... Huh? What are you saying so suddenly?"

Bewildered, Fate cocked her head to the side. That should have taken her completely by surprise, but she didn't seem very shaken. She was playing dumb quite perfectly. Dammit, did I mess up how I said that...?

Kuroneko snorted, as if commenting on how my ploy had been no help at all. With an air that said "Step down, I'll handle things from here," she faced Fate and did what she did best.

"... Don't play dumb, you fucking insect. You're despicable, aren't you, you piece of scum? We've come this far, and you still intend to annoy me?"

Kuroneko-san, t-that was quite something so suddenly!

Calling her a fucking insect in that eerie chanting tone of yours?! In her place, I would just burst out into tears!

"Y-You, be guiet for a bit."

Kuroneko was probably just trying to speak like she usually did, so for someone like me who had gotten used to her poisonous mouth, I really couldn't think anything of it other than "Well, here we go again..." But just look at Fate's face! It was almost like the words were a bit too sharp, and the pain wasn't even registering!

"W... What did you say?"

"W-Well, I mean... she was talking about how you stole Maisora, you know...?"

Even I would admit that my method of questioning was too soft. Honestly, I probably wouldn't be cut out for being a detective.

"K-Kumagai-san! What is the meaning of these rude people?! They're accusing me of theft!!"

Fate stood up violently as she pointed to us two. Her shout was harsh and serious, but Kumagai-san stood stock still like a member of the Secret Service <sup>[6]</sup> and responded in his usual calm tone.

"... According to those two, the true author of Maisora was their little sister, and you conned the manuscript from her and passed it off as your own work. They also claimed that you used my business card to pose as an editor."

Kumagai-san took out the business card that had Fate's cell phone number and mailing address on it, and placed it on the desk. Fate gave a single glance at the business card, and once again returned her gaze to Kumagai-san.

"Don't tell me you actually believe what they're saying? We get claims like this all the time."

"... Leaving aside what I think about the matter, this is a genuine business card belonging to me. And the contact information printed on it is the same as Fate-chan's. Of course, these things could mean anything. They could mean anything, but... there are elements in this case that put it on a different level than the usual claims we deal with. So, I called Fate-chan over here so we can deal with this."

"I can't believe this! Kumagai-san, are you saying you doubt me?!"

Fate yelled desperately. If Kumagai-san really completely believed in her innocence, he probably would have told her beforehand that we were here waiting for her. She probably realized that.

The editor she had worked so hard with for years and years had possibly come to doubt her.

Her bitter yell was probably not an act. Even though she was my enemy, I couldn't help but sympathize with her a bit.

"No, we were the ones who made Kumagai-san set up this meeting. We asked him to let us talk to you in private for the first thirty minutes at least. And we asked him to keep the purpose of this meeting a secret from Fate-san and to just call you over."

"I told you to stop calling me Fate!"

She really didn't like that name. She honestly looked and sounded pretty scary, but I wasn't frightened off by it.

"... I just want to clear things up. Speaking personally, I am hoping that their claims of theft are just wild delusions. If that's the case, there's no issue. Fate-chan's innocence would be proven, and not only would these two be strictly reprimanded, but they would be banned from this editorial department. Don't I say this often? That I am always your ally, since I'm your editor."

Those were probably his true feelings. He listened to our story, let us show him the proof we had, and setup the meeting we were in now... but he was definitely not on our side. Considering he had just met us a few days ago, when compared to the novelist he had been working with for a long time, we were much less trustworthy to him. That much went without saying.

"... I understand, if Kumagai-san puts it that way... I guess I have no choice. I'll play along with this little farce."

Upon hearing her editor's words, Fate seemed to have regained her composure.

"I'll listen to what you two have to say. Umm... what was it? That I had stolen this novel? I want to get this over with quickly, so let's start from the heart of the issue. You have proof, right?"

Tch... I knew this was coming eventually, but I guess we're starting from there.

This person hijacked Kirino's account on the submission website, and upon securing the manuscript data that was on there, she posted the entirety of Maisora online.

Because of that, the evidence that Kirino was the real author of Maisora had been wiped clear.

It was quite a cunning method.

"Let me just say that I definitely did no such thing, and that Maisora was written by me, and is my work. You appear to say differently, in which case you should take responsibility for making a false accusation."

"Ugh..."

It was too early to give up. Yes, it wasn't as if all the evidence had disappeared. As I looked for the item in question in my bag, Fate faced Kuroneko and scrutinized her.

"By the way, you over there. Who exactly are you? You've been mouthing off to me, but do you really think you can get away with having that attitude?"

"What an idiot. Why do I need to be respectful to a thief? You're pretty cocky for a crap wannabe who wasn't able to take off for ten years. Stealing the garbage that other people write and pretending to be a decent writer with that? How tragic. Honestly, is your life worth anything at all?"

"Don't screw with me and answer me! Do you have proof?! Or don't you?! Which one is it?!"

"Hah, you're showing your true colors, aren't you, you fool? I was wondering what kind of garbage you were going to spit out with that filthy mouth of yours, but of all things, it was just 'Do you have proof?'... ku ku ku ku... you sound just like a cliché villain with that line. It's almost as if you've half-admitted your own guilt ku ku ku... The end is nigh... Feel free to just die in my arms..."

What kind of demon queen are you supposed to be? Go back to Alefgard, you dimwit.

If it was a competition over who could sound more like a villain though, then there was no doubt that Kuroneko would win.

Don't tell me you've forgotten that we're here for Kirino's sake.

Seeing that Kuroneko was not being affected in the slightest, no matter how much she yelled, Fate was taken aback. But... after that one moment, the atmosphere suddenly changed completely.

"Kuroneko-san... was it? This is advice from the bottom of my heart. It would be good for you to stop such unbecoming behavior. You'll come to really regret it."

Her tone was quite sober. She gave off the impression that she was looking at something incredibly annoying.

She was quite a different person from when she was answering the accusations of theft. She spoke with the sincerity of an adult speaking to a child, and with the compassion of someone who was speaking to a younger version of themselves.

"... It's none of your business."

Quite unusual for her, Kuroneko laid her expression bare. It was almost as if she had been forced to look at something she didn't want to look at, as if she was gazing into a mirror which showed an unsightly, older version of herself.

But that lasted for only a second, and she quickly returned to a mocking expression.

She gave a quick glance, and plastered on a sickly sweet smile while jutting out her chin.

"... Please tell her, my dear Watson. [8] Show this incompetent criminal who thinks that she's managed to destroy all the evidence the hell we have prepared."

"Who the hell is Watson, you little..."

Geez... it seems we're finally getting to the heart of the matter. Trying to dampen my nervousness, I did as commanded by this jakigan detective and took out this hell... or rather, the evidence we had brought. Kirino's cell phone and notebook.

"... Could it be that there was manuscript data left? But even so-"

"Take a look for yourself, here. This is the proof that my little sister was the author of Maisora."

I passed the cell phone and notebook over to Fate. In that notebook was written the plot and the data notes that my sister had gathered for writing Maisora. On Christmas Eve, I had gone with her to Shibuya... we had walked around the 109 building, went shopping at an accessory shop, watched a live musical performance, she suddenly poured water over herself and sat shivering, and for her to be able to take a shower I reluctantly went with her to a love hotel, and she even took the opportunity to take notes in there... those experiences were bound together in that notebook.

That was the proof that Kirino was the author of Maisora.

By the way, we had already shown these two pieces of evidence to Kumagai-san. So if Fate tried to break the cell phone or rip up the notebook, it would be counted as a self-admission of guilt. Even she probably understood that much. Eventually, she flipped through the notebook and frowned.

I thought she was becoming desperate upon having evidence shoved in her face... but she pointed to a corner of the notebook.

"What's up with this weird drawing here? ... Some mean-looking version of the Yaranaio?" [9]

"That's not what I wanted you to look at! Look at what's written, what's written in the middle! Those sketches... they're probably drawings of me."

I mean, during Kirino's data gathering, I got angry, confused, upset, close to tears... and those were probably drawings of me during those times. And there were even little captions to accompany them.

Honestly, I couldn't deny that they were strange, terrible drawings.

And then, written next to the drawings...

- -> A drawing of the idiot when he apologized to the shopkeeper after not having enough money to pay for an accessory (^0^).
- ^ "Sorry I don't have enough money," he said! Haha! So gross! (lol)

<- I made him buy me earrings. I let the idiot choose one himself, but he has no sense at all and spent such a long time! (^^;)

^ The idiot got really pissed when I got all wet (>\_<) How much of a siscon is he?! wwwww [10]

<- The idiot got all excited seeing his little sister in a bathrobe. Nuuuuu, Kiririn's chastity is in danger?!

Agh~~~!!! Kill me now~~~!! I don't want to remember any of that, just kill me now~~~!!

Also, that curly handwriting just pissed me off! Every single little word got on my nerves.

Also, what the hell?! Why does the guy presenting the evidence here have to be subject to such torture?!

I wanted her to just look at the plot and the data written there, not to stare at the little drawings Kirino made of me!!

"... Both the things I just handed to you are the things my little sister collected for the sake of writing Maisora. That cell phone also has the photos she took on Christmas Eve."

"...."

Fate fell into silence, and looked over the things Kirino had prepared in order to write Maisora.

"... Hmph. Did you think that this was sufficient proof?"

"P-Pretty much."

"I looked over all of this, but... yes, it certainly is quite well done. It does certainly feel like the childish notes a junior high school student would make. Ahh, yes, yes, I see. I can see that you believed that your sister wrote Maisora after she showed you these. Ahah, you two really are quite big siscons, aren't you?"

Fate chuckled, and tossed Kirino's cell phone and notebook back this way.

"So, who cares?"

"Well..."

"Yes. That's just some delusional data your sister made up after reading Maisora."

Fate spoke shamelessly. I could feel blood suddenly rushing to my head...

"You-"

I felt a sharp elbow in my side and stopped moving. Kuroneko had inferred what I was about to do and had nipped it in the bud. She probably had learned to read my actions ever since I had yelled at Kumagai-san back then.

I was out of commission, and in my place, Kuroneko began to speak in a calm voice.

"How do you explain the timestamp on the photos? They were all taken at Shibuya on Christmas Eve."

"So? I'm not too familiar with cell phones, but it's not difficult to forge digital data, right? Or rather, maybe it was just a coincidence."

"Coincidence...?"

"Yes. Ah, this is probably close to what happened, right? That is, your sister happened to take a lot of photos at Shibuya on Christmas Eve and stored them on her phone. And then she realized that the setting of Maisora was the same as the photos she herself took, and then she started to say that she was the author of Maisora! And then, of course, it was your cute little sister telling you these things, so in your stupidity you completely were taken in, and without even considering what a bother you would be, you took the issue all the way to the Shinjuku publishing company. Ahaha, what an idiot simpleton, ahh, how embarrassing."

Right then, Fate mocked Kuroneko with as much condescension as she could muster.

"Geez, this is why brats like you are so much trouble. You're causing trouble for us adults, so keep your childish delusions to the confines of your own room, please."

" ....."

All the light vanished from Kuroneko's eyes. To make matters worse, her pupils that I was sure had been black up until then had at some point become red.

"@#\$#@#@!\$@%%#\$@\$#@#..." <sup>[11]</sup>

"Stop your chanting! I have no idea what's going on, but be quiet! Return to your senses!"

Kuroneko had suddenly stood up and began chanting some nonsensical spell or something, and I held her back from behind and stopped her.

You aren't calm at all, are you?! I was so surprised I even forgot about my anger!

Also, you're really damn strong, aren't you?! Was this the so-called placebo effect?!

"Let me go, niisan, you won't be able to kill her." [12]

"Don't say such disturbing things!"

As I restrained Kuroneko with all my might, I yelled at Fate.

"Also, you cut it out! My little sister really isn't that cute! If she really ran her mouth with delusional claims like that, I would have smacked her and shut her up myself already!"

It probably wouldn't have happened that way in reality, but I could probably retort with something like that... in my heart at least!

"... The ones who are being unreasonable are you two... enough is enough. You two are just pathetic."

For some reason, Fate watched our exchange with a pained expression, and sent us a scornful look.

"In any case... if you've said all you wanted to say, we're going to end here. The thirty minute mark is coming up soon, so I won't be playing along past this. Is that alright, Kumagai-san?"

"... Yes, it is."

Kumagai-san nodded expressionlessly. As I said before, we had already shown Kirino's cell phone and notebook to Kumagai-san. He told us the exact same thing – that these things alone were insufficient. Kumagai-san was fundamentally on her side. And it's not like we could choose a more impartial judge.

But...

"We still have proof. Something decisive."

Dramatically, I took out my final trump card.

It was a bundle of A4 sized paper.

"Kousaka-san, that is...?"

"It's the sequel to Maisora. My little sister wrote it."

Geez... I was really surprised when I found out this thing existed.

We were working hard to deal with this plagiarism issue, but we had kept that a secret from Kirino.

So, we had a really hard time gathering every piece of evidence. A little while ago, just like a certain someone had done, I snuck into my sister's room. I waited until she had gone downstairs to eat, and stealthily searched through her room. At any other time, she would have been stuck in bed, and the door would have been locked... I mean, if I had been found out, that would have been the end of me, so even though I could say it was for a just cause for the sake of my sister, I felt incredibly self-conscious and guilty during that.

While I was in there, I couldn't help myself from thinking "What the hell am I doing...?"

But, you can't say I didn't get results. When I borrowed my sister's notebook and was checking through it, I found scribbles relating to a sequel for Maisora, and when I searched more deeply I found another notebook.

And, in that notebook I found two passwords listed, one for "work use" and one for "personal use." They both seemed to be passwords for the Cell Phone i-Club. But on the "work use page," entering the password returned an "Incorrect Password" error and I couldn't login with it.

In other words, the "work use" page was the site that Fate had hijacked, and the site where the manuscript of Maisora had been kept.

And then, on the "personal use" page, there was the thing that Kuroneko had called a rape novel, and a cell phone novel titled Maisora Another Side: Little Sister's Perspective. When I read the latter, it seemed to be the story of Maisora told from the perspective of the protagonist's little sister, Shiori. You could call it a sequel in a sense. When Kirino had said that the little sister was an incredibly important character, she wasn't lying.

To summarize, it was like this:

Kirino had registered separate pages for "work use" and "personal use," and the "work use" site, where the Maisora manuscript had been stored, was stolen by Fate.

However, the "personal use" page remained, and therein lay what could be called a sequel to Maisora, or rather a different version of Maisora.

I mean, I was admittedly pretty confused as to why that thing was there. Kirino had only been directed by the fake Kumagai-san to write just the one cell phone novel with Rino as the protagonist. So, what was the point in writing a continuation novel that wasn't even going to be published? That's what I thought... but...

It was not that cut and dry. She probably just wrote this novel because she wanted to write it.

In any case...

"Earlier, Fa... Setsuna-san said it, right? That she thought this was a meeting to discuss a sequel for Maisora... right? And, the sequel that Setsuna-san wrote for Maisora already exists, and Kumagai-san has already read it, has he not?"

"Yes, that is correct."

Kumagai-san answered straightforwardly. Fate turned pale and bared her teeth.

"S-So what?"

"So... I'm saying that we should read both of these and compare them. Comparing both with the original, it should be easy to make clear which one is the real thing and which one is the fake. Am I wrong?"

"Are you saying that whichever one is better is the real one?! That's just a subjective opinion! You can't possibly think that you can tell between real and fake with just-"

"Heh, I guess you're afraid to lose."

I brazenly challenged her. I modeled my tone after Kirino and Kuroneko.

"... What did you say?"

"If you didn't hear me the first time, I can repeat it however many times you want. Someone like Rino-sensei, who's been training to be a novelist for

over ten years and finally, happily made her professional debut, has no confidence in winning against a delusional junior high school student."

This was definitely a gamble. For one, she might not take the bait, and even if she did, if her sequel novel turned out to be better than Kirino's, then this all would have been for naught.

But well... this is what I think. Even though I'm just a novice who doesn't know anything about cell phone novels.

The book Kirino wrote... take the absolutely unlikeable characters, or the simple premise and story filled with overly-convenient events, or the overly-idealistic, delusional dialogue between Rino and Toshi...

Those were things that came from Kirino, and were hers and hers alone. She put her all into thinking about her novel, even took her despised older brother out to collect data, and I'm sure her novel was profoundly influenced by her real life experiences up to this point.

She had taken a break off from her modeling and club activities and just kept on writing and writing and writing... and like that this novel had come to fruition. And for that reason, her novel had been very well-received by this age's girls, and had become quite popular.

And so...

"There's no way the real thing would lose to the fake. That's what I firmly believe."

And then, the time of reckoning had arrived.

The manuscript Kirino had written versus the one Fate had written. Having read both of them many, many times, Kumagai-san resolutely put them back on the desk, and gave out a long, leisurely sigh.

"Fuehhh....."

He closed his eyes and sunk into thought. His already fiendish face tightened into something even more sinister, and he let out an almost poisonous-looking breath. After that, we sat there in silence for a long, long, long, long time... and finally, he solemnly opened his mouth.

"Let me tell you what I've decided."

Kumagai-san took one of the two manuscripts on the table and pushed it into the center of the table.

"This one was much more interesting."

It was the one I had handed over... in other words, the one Kirino had written.

"... So you mean..."

"Yes. I think that this one is the real one."

"... Really?!"

Uwaaah, as expected from a pro editor! Amazing! Being able to judge impartially between the manuscript of the novelist he was in charge of and the manuscript we had just shoved in his face... and he saw that Kirino's was the real one! You're great, Kumagai-san! I'm sorry for ever doubting you!

Without thinking, I took up a guts pose. Wanting to share this moment of exaltation, I looked next to me, but to no effect, seeing as Kuroneko was staring at Kumagai-san with her usual emotionless expression.

"That's..."

Fate paled and seemed completely nonplussed, but the minute she came back to her senses, she grabbed at Kumagai-san.

"Y-You're my editor, aren't you?! Do you have any idea what you just said?!"

"Yes, of course. This is an exceedingly serious problem. After I report this to the higher ups, I'll have to consider my own resignation."

"What ... ?!?!"

At Kumagai-san's unexpected answer, the furious Fate was at a completely loss for words.

If there was something wrong with the novelist, some of the blame would probably fall on that novelist's editor.

And Kumagai-san had acknowledged that Kirino's novel was the real one, even though he knew of the consequences. If I were in his place, I might have just continued to deny everything despite the evidence. As much as

he was an old man that pissed me off in a few ways, when it came to work he was a sincere and honest person.

"This is probably the last project I'll ever do."

Kumagai-san laughed a bit, and then started speaking in the same ruthless tone he had taken up when criticizing Kuroneko's novel that other day.

"... The manuscript that Fate-chan sent me sounded and looked exactly like something 'Rino' would write... but that really was it. Apart from the cosmetic similarities, the heart and soul of the work was completely different. The pure simplicity of the characters or the bizarre plot twists that I saw in the first novel, the things that excited me and got me to the edge of my seat, were nowhere to be found in this manuscript. In a word, it wasn't interesting at all. I really can't believe that this was written by the same 'Rino,' and I'm almost certain it wouldn't sell well as the sequel to the very promising 'Maisora.' Even if these two hadn't come forward, you would have to rewrite... no, to re-plan the entire thing, I think."

"							"

As usual, the old man was merciless.

I really do think there was probably a better way he could have put it...

But regardless, this wasn't something Rino had written. This wasn't something that would sell well. Having received the full force of Kumagai-san's biting criticism, Fate took it almost exactly the same as Kuroneko had taken such criticism a few days ago, and hung her head in shame.

Kumagai-san picked up the manuscript that Kirino had written.

"This one is definitely something 'Rino' had written. To be blunt, it's quite interesting. It's even more ridiculous than the first volume, and the author took one too many liberties here and there, but in fact that may not be such a bad thing. I especially liked this ending segment. It ended in a deeply moving scene that rivals Makoto's scenario from Kanon, [13] and it tore my heart to pieces. I am confident that we can send this novel out to the people who had enjoyed Maisora."

Doing a complete 180, Kumagai-san began to give Kirino's cell phone novel high praise.

This was the first time I saw this person praising something so openly. To think that Kirino's manuscript could cause him to react so passionately furthered my exaltation... but at the same time, that fuzzy feeling I had felt once before once again swirled in my chest. Unconsciously, I bit my bottom lip.

Why was it that I felt so pained even though our plan had worked out so well?

Of course, there was a person right in front of me who was feeling a hundred times more pain than I was.

"... I see. What I wrote... wasn't interesting at all...?"

It was Fate. It was almost as if she had grown old over the past minute. All her willpower and energy seemed to have left her.

Completely beaten, Fate seemed to have almost admitted that she had stolen Kirino's work. As she had aptly said before, whatever Kumagai-san said, it would be nothing more than a subjective opinion.

If she had continued to be defiant and stubbornly feign innocence, it was very possible that she could have complicated the matter and thrown our argument into quicksand.

And it wasn't as if I had any other cards to play in this situation.

The delicate silence continued for a while longer, until finally, a light smile floated up to the surface of Fate's expression. In a bizarrely calm tone, Fate mumbled.

"... Ahh, I remember now. 'To be blunt, it's quite interesting'... those were the exact words you used the first time you praised my writing as well."

"That's true."

Kumagai-san nodded with a hint of nostalgia.

"... It was my third year in junior high school, wasn't it? I had made it to the final screening round in this company's amateur competition... in those days they called it the Dengeki Game Grand Prize though... and you called me... and invited me to the editorial department in Ochanomizu..."

It was a common pattern to publish the winning entries of the amateur competitions, but there were also cases where editors would choose to take on authors who hadn't won at their own discretion. Recruit them, so to speak.

"... That really brings me back. At that time, you spent around four hours bashing my work. I was really depressed."

I heard Kuroneko's breath catch. What Fate said reminded us precisely of what had happened a few days ago.

"Ahaha... it really almost embarrasses me to death thinking about that now... but the things I was writing back then... although these words didn't exist at that time... they were just blatant Chuunibyou Jakigan novels, weren't they? I had thought they were so good at the time... I was brimming with confidence... and how I behaved back then was just painful to look at."

At that, Fate looked sadly at Kuroneko.

"You know, you really remind me of how I was back then. From how you talk, and how you dress... look, our beauty marks are also in the same spot under our eyes... so it really struck a nerve when I saw you acting like that... hey, you don't have a single friend, do you? You're completely alone at school, aren't you? Thinking that you're more special than others, and believing that you're different from all the other lower beings around you... Looking down on those around you, blaming your own incompetence and isolation on others, and then finding escape in the world of fiction. 'Ahh, if terrorists came and attacked this class, I would awaken the dark powers hiding inside me, massacre the attackers, and save these ignorant dogs around me'... can you honestly tell me that you've never thought that in the middle of class, looking around the room aimlessly with your head in your hands?"

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Kuroneko didn't answer. Her eyes widened for just a second, but immediately returned to their usual emotionless state.

We had never mentioned that Kuroneko had aspirations to be a novelist... it was almost as if she were talking about herself. Well, granted, she was indeed just talking about herself.

"... That has nothing to do with this situation."

I spoke up for Kuroneko, but Fate couldn't hold herself back.

"In any case, speaking from experience, you really should relieve yourself of those delusions as quickly as possible. Reality is not that forgiving. No matter how hard you may try, there are some dreams that just won't come true. There are plenty of things that you just can't do anything about. This sorry state of mine should prove that more than anything else."

"As I said, this has nothing to do with-"

Irritatedly, I tried to repeated myself, but Fate cut me off and just continued to talk.

"I know, I know, this is about the story 'Rino' wrote, right? Aha, isn't that hilarious, that someone like me, who has continued to write and write and write for ten years and has barely been able to find time to sleep... that something that I wrote was boring? And then the little brat who began writing a few months ago only half-seriously, with barely any understanding of the rules of good writing... that the novel she wrote would be interesting? A rising star? Expected to be a big hit? ... Hah... what the hell? This... can something like this seriously happen?! That's ridiculous, isn't it?!"

"You-!"

Not being able to take her incredibly annoying little ramble any longer, I raised my voice to find some way to shut her up, but...

"Yeah, I agree completely."

I couldn't speak upon hearing that voice butt in. I instinctively turned around.

The one who had signaled her agreement with Fate's bitter speech had been Kuroneko.

Her voice, filled with resentment, was oddly low, and reverberated around the room as if it had come from the depths of hell.

"Even though you bashed what I wrote so harshly, why is it that you can speak so highly of her piece of garbage cell phone novel? I can't understand this at all. Even though the things I despise the most are well received in the eyes of the world, what I write is insulted and criticized.

What do you mean I can't just write what I want? Wasn't she doing the same thing when she wrote that? Why am I the only one whose work is completely rejected?"

Kuroneko continued on and on in the same emotionless, blunt tone she always used. But her words were filled with invisible pressure. Filled with the same dark sentiments as Fate's words had been.

"H-Hey, hey! Hey hey hey! What the hell are you saying so suddenly?!"

I couldn't help but unconsciously butt in at this absolutely unexpected turn of events.

We finally managed to produce some definitive proof, right? Wasn't this the scene where we struck the final, decisive blow against the criminal who was blurting out all her motives in a burst of anger?

We were so close!

So why were you saying things like that here?

It didn't seem like I was the only one who was completely bewildered. Fate also had widened her eyes.

I wasn't surprised, considering someone who had done nothing but spew abuse at her up until now had suddenly went through a complete reversal and was now defending her instead.

"... Y-You... what are you saying?"

"Hmph, I'm saying that I understand how you feel. I might not have been at it as long as you have, but for three years I've been reading textbooks, studying with the help of novel-writing sites, submitting manuscripts, networking... I've continued to write things that I consider good. So isn't it obvious I'm frustrated? Ahh, I'm so frustrated, frustrated, frustrated. And I'm jealous. The one who had so much fun writing that book and then showed it off with such an arrogant expression... and the editor who read it and praised it to high heaven... everyone can just go off and die. It's like that, isn't it?"

"... T-Taking it that far is..."

"Don't even try to lie to me. Just man up and admit it. 'It serves you right, you bastard novelist, and go die, Kumagai'... you've thought that, haven't you? What are you still hesitating for when we've already come this far?"

Don't make things worse, you! And also, you're actually being serious, aren't you?!

"Hmph, to be honest, that girl rubbed me the wrong way from the first time we met. We never see eye to eye, and whenever she opens her mouth all that comes out is self-satisfied crap, and she always looks down on me... on top of that, this shitty cell phone novel that she just began writing a few months back is getting published? Don't screw with me. Do you think I can actually bear something as absurd as that?"

"W-Whose side are you on?! Weren't you here to help get back Kirino's cell phone novel?!"

I yelled, not being able to sit here watching silently anymore. At my words, Kuroneko sneered.

"Whose side am I on, you ask? Are you an idiot? I'm sure I've already said that I'm just here to sate my own curiosity. Why do I have to lower myself and work so hard just to cover someone else's mistakes?"

Wasn't that just an excuse you just gave out of embarrassment...?!

"Hmph, although, you're one to talk. Don't tell me you've never been annoyed about how everything always is about your sister."

"T-That's... that has nothing to do with this!"

"Nothing to do with this? Heh, as if I care. I'm just saying something I've always wanted to say."

"Even if you say it so smoothly, there are just things you can't say!"

Are you Kirino or something?! I almost feel like I'm talking with my little sister here!

What are you trying to do, ignoring the real criminal and taking over this dungeon as the last boss yourself?!

And having lost her role in this little drama, isn't Fate also completely confused right now?!

Ugh! Leaving her outburst aside... well, I mean... it's probably very true that Kuroneko knew how Fate felt.

The frustration of being over taken by someone who had started working after you, even though you've written so much.

The misery of having none of your efforts pay off. In a world that only saw value in things you despised.

And then, the someone who did have her efforts pay off. The someone who was accepted just by doing what she wanted the way she wanted it to be done.

A helpless situation. A reality out of her control.

I don't know exactly what she was feeling. It wasn't my place to say that I understood.

But, thinking about my sister who was so different from the plain old me, thinking about my little sister whom I could never win against no matter how much I tried... I understood the misery that could come from knowing that such a person was right next to me, day after day. And I could sympathize with the feeling of helplessness that came from continually comparing yourself to someone you just couldn't win against.

Why was everything always about my sister?

Ah, that was it.

At that point, I suddenly came to a realization.

Crap, that was it. That was it...

These base feelings of jealousy were precisely the fuzzy feelings that have been swirling around in my chest.

When I realized that Kirino's work had been stolen and all her effort had gone to waste, I honestly was pretty delighted. But then, I saw that pained expression on my little sister's face...

"It serves her right. I consider this payback for her getting so full of herself and making a fool out of me."

The jealousy that came from wondering why she had all the talent, why everything she laid her hands on went well... I think part of that feeling translated into hatred. That was certainly true in recent times. Being able to come closer to her, I was shown once again how amazing she was.

... Geez, I'm a pathetic older brother, aren't I?

At that time, when I saw Kirino trying to act strong with tears coming out of her eyes, I really felt embarrassed.

I mean, because I had gotten so irritated... had gotten so resolved to do something about the issue, to make sure her efforts didn't go to waste, right?

And then, perhaps, this Kuroneko who had been spurting out her gloomy feelings against Kirino for a while now, perhaps she also...

"... I could not care less what happened to that girl. You think I'm here to help her? Don't even joke like that. Honestly, going through some painful experiences would be good for that girl."

Although I felt that all her words reflected her true feelings, they were all made from lies, bluffs, and excuses. It was almost like I was looking in a mirror. No matter how much I might say things were out of character or didn't have anything to do with me, if someone asked me "well, why the hell are you doing what you're doing then?" I probably wouldn't be able to answer, or wouldn't be able to do anything other than continuing to make pathetic excuses.

"Ugh, she ticks me off. She really ticks me off. Whether I'm asleep or awake, she ticks me off. Everything in this world ticks me off. If only a bomb would fall from the heavens and obliterate everything."

I knew the irritation she was feeling all too well. Everyone can empathize with the feeling of helplessness she was feeling right now.

Yes, we were not here for Kirino's sake at all. We were here for ourselves.

We were just here helplessly trying to do something about these feelings of helplessness.

So, even if this situation gets resolved happily, I definitely didn't want to be thanked by my sister. Kuroneko would probably say the same. If you asked us what we thought of Kirino, both Kuroneko and I would probably give the same exact answer in the same exact way.

We absolutely haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaated that girl!! But...

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"But, that is that."

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Exactly. I was honestly lost as to what Kuroneko was feeling when she said those words. But that was exactly right. There was no reason behind it. Certainly, I hated my little sister. Absolutely hated her. My pretty, multi-talented sister... just by being next to me, I would be compared to her, would feel a sense of helplessness, and the person herself ridiculed and looked down at me.

But, even then, I couldn't do anything here but yell like this. I'm her brother, after all.

"Hey, listen to me, Setsuna-san!"

"...?!"

Suddenly being talked to, Fate trembled in surprise.

Not concerned about her reaction, I raised my voice up loud.

"What you stole was something my sister had put her all into writing! Something she had tried so hard to write! She put in much, much more effort than I did on this! She even took her despised older brother out to gather data with her, and even though she collapsed from fever she just kept on working away on her cell phone. So I'm not surprised the result would be so good. Even though you didn't even look at it... don't just belittle her efforts!"

It was almost as if I was yelling at myself. It was anger at myself for being jealous of my hugely different little sister, of resigning myself to just considering her as a special case and not even trying to see how hard she had worked.

"I really don't know how much you've worked up until now. But, don't just use that as an excuse to say that my sister didn't try! Don't underestimate my little sister!"

At that point, it seemed that the people around me had finally recovered from the surprise of my sudden outburst.

- "... You idiot. Don't interrupt people while they're speaking."
- "... What the hell do you understand?"

Both Kuroneko and Fate glared at me, as if telling me to back off.

But! I turned their anger right back at them!

"But I said I don't understand, right?! Just listen! Alright?! Alright? The most useless person here is me! The most pathetic person here is also me! I have no idea what you two are feeling right now, but there's no mistaking that! Because, when I compare myself with you two, I really haven't put in any effort at all! Haven't tried at all! Even though such an amazing little sister was right next to me, I couldn't get close to her or learn anything from her! Compared to that, you two have tried much more!"

The true feelings I had wanted to say came flying out of my mouth.

"I really respect her! This is quite an amazing accomplishment, isn't it?! I love her! She's really amazing!"

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"Wha-" "...."
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Across from me, Fate widened her eyes. I heard Kuroneko's breath catch next to me.

I might have said a bit too much, but at this point I didn't have the time to care.

I clenched my teeth, tightened my fists, and my voice became strained.

"So... when you say you haven't gotten results, or when you say you feel helpless... that might be the case, but don't say that so much! What's going to happen if you hate on yourself so much?! I mean, what about someone like me, who hasn't tried half as much as you?! I should just go and die, right?! That's right, isn't it, dammit! ... Ghng..."

"... Nii-san, are you aware of how incoherent you sound right now? And why exactly are you crying?"

"Shut the hell up! It's because you two are teasing me, isn't it?! Whatever, just give it back! That was something really important to my little sister! So I'm begging you, just give it back! I'll do anything, just don't take away all her precious work! Don't just waste all the hard work you've done up until now! Dammit, I don't know how to say this... I don't even know what the hell I'm saying anymore... just please!"

I banged my head down onto the desk forcefully and begged desperately without even glancing to the side.

"... You..."

Fate opened her eyes wide at my unsightly, violent attitude. I really looked like a terrible siscon right now, didn't I? Even though I'm really not. Definitely, definitely not.

"... Quite shameful, aren't you, oniisan...? My my..."

Kuroneko ridiculed me contemptuously, and then faced Fate.



"... I will ask you to return her work as well. To have your own story turned into a book, and to have it be read by many people... how happy and wonderful that makes you feel is something that you should know more than anyone, right?"

Kuroneko's prodding voice was quite a different beast than the voice smeared with jealousy and hatred she had been using just a minute ago. It was kind, gentle... and overflowing with sincerity.

"So please, give her work back... I mean, just because our own efforts have not bore fruit up until now, no matter how frustrated or jealous or how intolerable you find it, this isn't just something where the ends justify the means. Say whatever you want about me, but please do not curse everything you yourself have done up until this point. If you do... I really will curse you to death."

It was a conclusion quite becoming of her. Wait... even if I didn't break in, she was planning on persuading Fate like this all along, wasn't she? She was planning on saying what I wanted to say in a much better way like this all along, wasn't she? Geez... even though you had said you didn't care, and that it served her right... I wasn't the only one being incoherent, was I? ... Ugh.

I had already broken out into tears. Ugh, this isn't good. When I come back to my senses, I'm sure that I'm going to be embarrassed to death.

Having been hit with both my pathetic entreaty and Kuroneko's sincere appeal one after the other, Fate caught her breath... and finally, resignedly sighed.

"... You all... just saying whatever the hell you want... this is why I don't like brats. Now I know firsthand why Rino's cell phone novel seemed so incoherent. If she used people like you as a model, there's no wonder it turned out that way."

She spoke slowly as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

"... At this point, I think I would be able to write something like 'Maisora' as well. Just like the real Rino."

It was, in effect, a declaration of defeat.

I had begged her with a line of thought that bore no rhyme or reason, and was more driven by pure momentum than anything I had done before.

But even so, I wanted to believe that I had managed to get something across.

"... Eh, and I mean, don't you two hate your little sister?"

It seemed like she was still confused when it came to that point. Well, I can't blame her.

I'm her brother, so what else could I do? That irrational line of thought was nothing more than a means of trying to force people to understand all these things even I couldn't comprehend. Even though I hated her, even though there was no mistaking that, I couldn't respond in any other way to this situation. These unstoppable impulses were definitely things that only people who have stood in positions similar to mine could understand.

And then...

"... Hmph."

One step before I could lift my head off the table, Kuroneko sent back her response.

"Not trying to brag, but I do have just a few friends."

Missing seeing her expression when she said that... it was something I would regret for the rest of my life.

And then... well, let's talk about what happened afterwards in regards to the plagiarism situation.

lori Fate Setsuna admitted to having stolen the novel... umm, what exactly should I call her at this point...? Well, let's just go with Fate, like we've been doing up until now.

In any case, it seemed that Fate thought of the idea of stealing Kirino's work after reading her submission on the Cell Phone i-Club and being deeply impressed by that work.

"... This really might seem strange considering how much I was bashing it before. But it was really interesting, seriously. Of course, the writing style wasn't good at all, and the grammar was terrible... if this were me ten years ago reading it, I probably would have wanted to kill her. But, you could really feel that she was having fun from the bottom of her heart while she was writing it. It was as if she was proudly shouting 'Hey look, this is

me!' right in your face. But really, that was how I was like ten years ago too. Writing my first novel, I thought in a similar way, and definitely had a great time writing it. 'Let's do that, and this,' and getting a thrill out of it all. It really reminded me of those times... and for some reason I suddenly felt this annoyed, absurd feeling welling up in me..."

And then she had given into temptation.

- "... I really am very sorry. I was just being... I mean, from the very beginning I knew that I wouldn't be able to write something like 'Rino' did. Even though I knew that from the very beginning..."
- "... You really should be saying that to the person herself instead of us."

"Yeah... I really should."

Kumagai-san also lowered his head towards us.

"I really do apologize as well. There was absolutely no excuse for what had happened. I will have to apologize to the real Rino-sensei as well."

After that, he also said this:

\_

"The special thing about cell phone novels may be precisely what Fate-chan had felt. If you ask me, each and every one of us has the power to write things that only we can write, and to use that uniqueness to deeply impact a great number of people. This does not apply to only cell phone novels, but also doujinshi and doujinshi games, web novels, and even submissions on Nico Nico Douga and pixiv. [14] And in these amateur works, it is common to find scattered about hints of the unique visions that the creators had for their work. You can see all the interesting bits and pieces laid bare there; bits and pieces that wouldn't survive the editing process if the work were to be prepared for sale on the market. Just like how it works with cell phone novels, you should seek to capitalize as much as possible on the uniqueness your works have as amateur works - the fact that this type of model actually can hold its own in the market is proof in itself that amateurs can sometimes surpass professionals. Of course, I won't deny that there are works among these that are severely lacking technically... but nevertheless, just because these works can be a mixed bag is no reason to just lump them all together and reject them all.""

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"On the one hand, Fate-chan and Kuroneko-san. The work you two have done does not interest our company very much, and we definitely would not be able to publish it. That is something that probably will not change. But, I firmly believe that the work you want to do still has a wonderful possibility to touch a lot of people. In other words, it's like this."

A wicked grin appeared on his face.

"Please continue to try as much as you can."

To those same words, Kuroneko had once responded with nothing but animosity... but this time, her eyes soon burned with the flame of determination to triumph over this old man.

#### And then...

That day, Fate-san got in touch with Kirino, and after Kirino recovered from the flu both Kumagai-san and Fate-san went to apologize together. They gave her a rundown of the facts and details surrounding the situation (of course, they kept Kuroneko and my involvement in the matter a secret), and lowered their heads.

Kirino responded with something like "Ah, it's fine. To be honest, it really wasn't bothering me anymore," and readily forgave them. I thought "But you were crying about this, weren't you?" but it really did seem like outside of me, Kuroneko, and Saori, Kirino managed to be pretty nice. If only on the surface. Well, granted, it was true that she was quite famous in this neighborhood even though her real personality was like that. Geez, what a screwed up world we live in.

By the way, I heard about what had happened from Fate and Kirino separately.

"By the way, you seemed to be pretty bothered by what was happening, so I'll tell you now."

"Not like I really care. Hmph, well, the book went out under your name, right?"

"Yeah. Well, it was a bother to change it, so we just kept the penname as 'Rino.' Kumagai-san had said that doing that would make the book sell better. Hm, but..."

"What?"

"Nothing... hmm... it's just... there's something that doesn't make sense here. I mean, in the time I was stuck in bed, everything just resolved on its own, right? And I wasn't planning on doing anything about it either..."

"What's with that attitude? Just be happy that everything ended up going well."

I listened to my sister's complaints with complicated feelings.

... Also, although I don't really want to say it... my relationship with my sister hadn't really changed at all.

Granted, I had realized many things about our relationship after getting involved in this whole affair. But it was already too late. Even if I understood my reasons a bit better, that didn't change the fact that I still hated my little sister.

"... Sorry for everything up until now, Kirino."

"...? What the hell are you saying?"

Nothing. Nothing at all.

It was February. Around half a month after those events, Kirino appeared to have recovered from the flu and jumped right back into her work and club activities. I stopped seeing the once familiar sight of her going around fiddling with her cell phone, so when I asked her about her novels, she gave me this response.

"Ah, that? I stopped."

She had already agreed to take on a second volume, but it seemed that her days as a novelist would stop after that. She had already written up the manuscript for the second volume, so there wasn't much left for her to do.

From all the fuss of this episode, I had come to realize that being able to publish a book was quite an amazing accomplishment, so I was quite shocked. I mean... there are people who have been devoting themselves to this for ten years but haven't been able to publish anything, you know? Is it really alright... for her to just so casually throw that away?

Did Kuroneko know about this?

Various doubts and feelings ran through my head, but Kirino seemed resolute. She had already sent her apologies to Kumagai-san and all the

readers who were hoping to read more. Call it professionalism if you want, or rather a strong sense of duty.

"It's just that now, there are other things I definitely want to do. I have priorities, so I have to stop with the cell phone novels. I've also learned a lesson from collapsing after working too hard."

"Things you want to do? You don't mean new eroge releases, do you?"

"T-There's that too, sure!"

T-This girl! "I want to play eroge, so I can't keep on writing books"... if the aspiring novelists of the world heard you say that they would kill you, you know?! Geez, this is why people who are overly talented piss me off. Producing incredible results, but then nonchalantly throwing that away and moving right onto the next thing. For people who have spent their lives grinding away for results, all they would be able to say would be "I can't take this anymore!"

"You're thinking something rude, aren't you?! That's not the only thing I want to do!"

"Well then, what?"

"Huh? Why the hell do I have to tell you?"

Fine! Forget I asked!

Well, leaving that little exchange aside, today, for the first time in a while, Kirino's otaku friends had gathered at our house.

Now that I think about it, this was the first time Saori had come over to our house.

Also, I may have said that this was the first time in a while, but it really had been a few months since Kirino, Kuroneko, and Saori (with me as the extra) had been under the same roof together. Well, granted, they didn't go the same school, so it's not a surprise. Things pile up, and they don't have enough time to see each other.

So, really, you could say that this was a bit of a reunion party for friends who had not seen each other in a while. You might think that sounds pretty charming, but...

"Honestly, wasn't this supposed to be the continuation of the anime appreciation event we had last time?! So isn't it obvious we should finish watching Meruru when we stopped in the middle of an episode last time?! But you want to play Siscali?! Why the hell would I invite you over just to be forced to play what you're good at?! Hey, answer me, you piece of shit cat!"

"Isn't it natural that the host should make the guest feel comfortable? Even though I used up my long-awaited break to come here, the host seems intent on forcing us to do only what she wants to do... exactly what is the meaning of that? I even went so far as to bring a present for you."

When these two got together, it quickly devolved into this. Didn't they have other things they wanted to talk about that had built up over the past months? Why did they have to break out into a fight every time they met? Or was it that these fights were just their way of showing their affection for each other?

By the way, I guess I should mention that right now, we were in our living room. When I returned from the kitchen, carrying the snacks and juice I always prepared in situations like this, their battle had already begun.

I didn't want to spill the juice, so I didn't dare approach the table.

"... Gift? Could you mean this?"

As veins throbbed in Kirino's forehead, she took out a bundle of A4-sized papers.

Kuroneko calmly crossed her arms and nodded. She spoke in an incredibly sarcastic tone.

"Yes, precisely. You should be thankful for all my work in collecting those online reviews of Maisora and bringing them to you. You're curious about how it was doing, aren't you? Ms. Rino-sensei."

"Hmph, and that's why you cherry-picked all the trashy reviews and printed them out to show me?! How much of a crappy personality do you have?!"

"... How upsetting. This is the proof of our friendship, you know. It's a kind warning that you shouldn't get too full of yourself just because some overly generous readers praised the garbage you wrote."

"Why the hell do you care?! And what are you warning me about so smugly like that? Heh, you're just bitter, aren't you?! Nice one, you dumbass jealous wannabe!"

Continuing on by repeating "nice one!" over and over, Kirino began to mock Kuroneko with all her might.

"Kyahaha! Kyaaahahaha! Haaheehee~"

Almost dancing about, Kirino began to clap. While she looked at Kuroneko's face...

"Hey, what are you feeling right now? Hey hey, seeing someone who started writing after you debuts before you, what are you feeling right now? If you don't like it, why don't you just go and debut yourself? Doesn't it embarrass you as a creator to only be able to deal with your grudges by harassing me so childishly like this~?"

"..... Grrrrrrrrrr....."

Kuroneko was making a face I couldn't show to polite company. I really do wonder what she's feeling right now...

Kuroneko had gone through a lot to protect Kirino's cell phone novel too.

She had to bear with harsh criticism of her own doujinshi, verbally sparred with Fate-san, aired out her unsightly jealousy, but even after all that could put everything aside with a "but that is that" and sincerely wished to help save Kirino's work. And then to be called a dumbass jealous wannabe by the very person you saved... it was just pretty terrible treatment all around.

... No, that's not quite right.

Both Kuroneko and I had done what we had done solely to do something about the currents of jealousy swirling in our chests, and definitely had not done anything for Kirino's sake. So it would be illogical to be hoping for any words of thanks from her.

I'm her brother, so what else could I have done? She's her friend, so what else could she have done? Those might have been excuses, but you couldn't say that they were only excuses. Even if we didn't say it out loud, Kuroneko and I both understood this.

Yes. Things had turned out just fine.

I mean, in the first place, if we told Kirino the truth about what had happened, it would be terribly embarrassing and would be nothing but committing suicide. Kuroneko and I were both determined to take this secret with us to our graves.

Speaking of what I had gained from this entire experience, I guess I had achieved a strange semblance of camaraderie with Kuroneko.

Kuroneko and I definitely had similar feelings when it came to Kirino.

This was a gathering of the victims of Kousaka Kirino. A get-together of small-minded people who pretended to be strong even when they were gripped by envy and jealousy.

That was us... ugh, she's really getting full of herself, this completely uncute little sister of mine.

Well, it's not like I could help being irritated here. Hey, why don't I take a leaf from our club president's book and say something provoking myself?

"Hey hey Kirino, you're an author, aren't you? Do you really think you should be taking up such an arrogant tone towards the people who read your book? They all took precious time out of their schedules just to read it, you know. Well? The appropriate thing to do here would be to just keep quiet and listen to their advice, wouldn't it?"

"Are. You. An. Idiooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!"

Never before had I received such heartfelt words from my little sister.

I really wanted to believe that this personality problem was her problem alone, and that authors in general didn't have this issue.

After hitting me hard with her intense "Are you an idiot?!" Kirino suddenly seemed to have realized something, and began to scrutinize the top page on the pile of papers Kuroneko had given her.

"... By the way, this site's URL here... I've seen it on your SNS Profile Page, I think..."

"That's my site."

"... Wha...?!"

With no shortage of shock and anger, Kirino stiffened, with an expression like this-> ( $^{\circ}$  Д $^{\circ}$ ). The muscles on her face convulsed.

"Y-Y-You...."

"Is that your new impression of a chicken?"

"I'll kill you! I'll completely murder you! Y-You... Y-Y-You...."

"K-Kiririn-shi! Calm down! What are you going to do with that ashtray?!"

I had already began to run to try to stop Kirino, but Saori was one step ahead of me and bound Kirino's arms behind her back.

Nevertheless, as she watched Kirino being restrained, Kuroneko began to throw oil on the fire.

"Hah, as expected from a cell phone novelist, your vocabulary is severely lacking."

"Kyaaaaaaaah!?! Y-You just listen to me good! Alright?! Sooner or later, I'm definitely going to flood your damn site with flames!"

"... Hmph, how boring. Kukuku... I look forward to that. I'll let you experience firsthand the power of someone who has been around since the golden age of text sites..." [15]

"Y-Y-You stink of jakigan as usual, don't you?! This is why you go so far as to bury blog posts with gross comments! Also, you're wearing the same damn Gothic Lolita outfit today... what are you supposed to be, some Digital Cute Eroge character or something?!"

"Wha... what did you say? O-Once again, you've said something you shouldn't say... you round-faced model. Let me just take this opportunity to say that it's really gaudy for a junior high schooler to be running around with makeup on. Don't come too close to me, or that perfume reeking of bitch will get stuck to my clothes too."



"Shut up! Wear different clothes once in a while, dammit!"

For close to ten minutes after that, the two of them continued to throw cheap shots at each other.

In any case, when I asked Saori, she told me that the impetus for this conflict came when they had a difference of opinion over what they should do first today.

I would expect that from kids just starting elementary school. But seriously, it's unbecoming of junior high school students to be doing this.

Just hearing about what was happening tired me out, but for some reason Saori seemed happy. She was probably just glad that this group could finally get together again after such a long time.

And her happiness was quite contagious. Even though I knew, I asked anyway.

"... Hey, what are you smiling about?"

"Well, I was just thinking back on the first time we all met each other... over half a year has passed since then, right...? My my, time sure does fly."

"Yeah, I suppose."

Time certainly did fly. It flew, and during this short half a year I felt like I had changed quite a lot. For better or for worse.

If I hadn't picked up that DVD case my sister had dropped... I probably wouldn't be standing here with these people right now, I think. And now, I no longer just thought of Kuroneko and Saori as "my little sister's friends," but rather also as my own friends... as very important people to me. I hadn't met with them very often, but this wasn't about how many times we've met. Am I wrong? Haha, that's so out of character for me, those words.

As I sunk into these serious contemplations, Kirino took a break from arguing with Kuroneko and cut into Saori and my conversation.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Kiririn-shi. Haha, well, if you want to decide what we should do first, why don't we do the same thing that we did the first time we met?"

"What do you mean?"

Kuroneko cut in and asked about Saori's proposal. But I had already caught onto what she meant.

"That, remember? Going in order and each of us getting a turn to speak."

"As expected from Kyousuke-shi, getting right to the point. At that time, we were allowed to ask the person introducing himself or herself a question... that kind of game."

That was a game?

Kirino seemed to consent to this idea, and nodded.

"... How nostalgic. Kukuku... the first time we met, you were huddled up like a scared little kitten, weren't you...?"

"Wha-..."

At Kuroneko's recollection, Kirino flushed a brilliant red.

"Y-You weren't any better, were you?!"

"Well well... hahaha, it is quite nostalgic. After that, you both really hit it off after talking about anime..."

"Don't be an idiot. Who the hell would 'hit it off' with this woman..."

"We definitely didn't 'hit it off'!"

They both collectively denied Saori's statement. Ah, yes, it was like that. They had a difference of opinion over Meruru and Maschera, and got into a fight then too. And ever since then they had been like that. In a sense, they haven't changed at all. Just thinking about it made me smile.

... Hm, what was this? Could it be that I was enjoying a moment of reminiscence here? Ohh, that's pretty amazing if that's true. To think that I would be able to reminisce about something with my little sister.

Don't get me wrong though. It's not like I'm happy about it.

Saori forcibly pulled Kuroneko and Kirino apart as they had their glaring match. In order to steer the course of the argument in a different direction, she began to go on and on.

"In other words, this time, the one who gives the most interesting response to the topic can decide what we're going to do. And, the topic this time is 'something unexpected that happened to you recently.' Let's go in the same order as last time... Kuroneko-shi, go ahead!"

"... As always, you're just arbitrarily deciding things..."

The first time we had met, Kuroneko had said something similar. But even so, she didn't seem as displeased as she let on. And she continued in the same way she had that time long ago.

"Well, fine.... Hmph 'something unexpected that happened to you recently,' was it? ... Well..."

Kuroneko pondered the issue for a bit, and finally spoke in an indifferent tone while watching Kirino.

"Your brother confessed his love to me." (3)

Cough! Cough! Cough! Cough!

I gasped for air. Kuroneko! What the hell?! W-W-W-What the hell are you saying...?!

Certainly, I said something like that, but that was... that is...!!

Dammit! Through my violent coughs, I couldn't even put my explanation into words!

As that was happening, Saori bent forward in curiosity and raised her voice.

"Hoh hoh hoh hoh... and what exactly is the meaning of this? Please do fill us in on the details!"

"... Sorry, but I cannot. That's our little secret. Right, niisan?"

"You're already making her call you niisan?! Kyousuke-shi, there's a limit to how much you can be into eroge!"

"Noooooooooooo!!! Saori, what the hell?! You're just being cruel on purpose!"

"Naturally."

This asshole! I'll get both of them back for this someday! My fist shook in frustrated annoyance.

As if dealing the finishing blow, Kirino, the only one who wasn't in on the joke, sent me a scornful look.

"..... Gross."

She looked incredibly displeased. She was probably not able to take the idea that I had gotten closer to Kuroneko.

She might even be thinking that I was stealing one of her friends away from me. If that were the case, it would admittedly be a pretty cute situation. In any case, Kirino didn't seem to think too much of Kuroneko's response. Her chances of victory seemed to have slimmed.

Saori next announced that it was Kirino's turn, but having been put in a bad mood, Kirino turned away with an "I'm still thinking..." Having no other choice, Saori spoke cheerfully in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere a bit.

"Well, it's my turn then! Hmm, let's see... 'something unexpected that happened to you recently'... hm, I wonder what I should say..."

She didn't think of an answer even though she was the one who had proposed the topic? Well, it was pretty like her to do that, though.

Finally, Saori clapped her hands once, and hit us with quite an amazing announcement.

"The incident where I went to an arranged marriage meeting while I wore this outfit and the person I was meeting fainted."

How sad! I was so filled up on how to snarkily respond to her statement that I didn't even know where to begin, but that's really not something "unexpected that happened to you," right? Instead, it was something "traumatic that happened to whomever you were visiting."

"Disqualification."

Our voices harmonized. It seemed that everyone outside of Saori had come to the same conclusion.

"Ah, but I was so sure that was a good answer... well, that's fine. Then, once again, it's Kiririn-shi's turn! Have you thought of anything yet?"

"Hm, well... I don't think it's anything that impressive, but I guess I've thought of something... 'something unexpected that happened to you recently,' right? Well then..."

Kirino spoke in an unexpectedly hesitant way.

"I guess when I bought a game called 'Brute Brother' and thought it was a little sister game, but it turned out to be a homo game."

Yup, we have a winner.

What an awful conversation... I'm never playing one of Saori's topic games ever again.

And well, pretty much continuing in that way, the long-awaited otaku meeting came to an end. It seemed that their relationship hadn't changed a single bit in the space of these few months. It made me a bit happy to see that.

I saw Kuroneko and Saori off with Kirino in the entranceway, and the minute I turned back into the house I went back to my room and began to study. Well... I mean... how do I put it... I felt like I really had to try hard as well, you know?

Like that, I continued to study for a little while...

"... Phew, I'm pretty thirsty."

It's unavoidable that I would get tired doing something I wasn't used to doing. Shall I go wash my face, drink some water, and then give it one more go? Thinking that, I temporarily left my room and went down the stairs.

And then...

"Ommph."

Right when I got down the stairs, near the entranceway, I collided with my plain-clothed sister. There had always been a blind spot here, so it was a spot where we had often crashed into each other.

Thump. My left shoulder struck against Kirino's chest. The impact itself was not very strong, but it caused my sister's bag to drop onto the floor, and the contents to spill out.

"Ah..."

"Oh, sorry."

I sincerely apologized, and reached out for the cosmetics and other things that had spilled out... but I suddenly stiffened. What a strange sense of déjà vu...

"It's fine, so don't touch anything."

I felt like I had heard those words before. Although, I had stopped my hand before it actually got down to the floor, so this time she hadn't smacked my hand away...

... Tch. Just look at our relationship. In the end, it was still like this.

Feeling as if needles had been stuck into my chest, I watched as my sister began to pick up the cosmetics that had fallen onto the floor.

Having put the cosmetics back in her bag, Kirino scowled at me and put on her pumps.

"... Hey."

"The next time I ask for life advice will be the last."

... What did she just say right now?

For a while, I stood stock still in the entranceway, and stared at the door my sister had just gone out of.

### **Afterword**

Hi guys. This is Tsukasa Fushimi. Firstly, I want to thank you for buying this book.

By the time you guys see this afterword, it's already the third successful book I have published.

Other than the fact that I spent more time editing the original script than the last book, in the end, I still couldn't submit the original script, and even after I submitted it, many debates still happened. Was so scared that I actually broke out in cold sweat. And to all those that I troubled, I think I'll use this chance to apologize. Sorry everyone, I created trouble for you guys.

So, that aside, how did everyone find the third sequel?

If you found anywhere to have a good laugh, then I'm already happy enough.

To write this novel, I had quite a lot of people care for me. Firstly,I would want to thank those who've helped me get ideas via Phone novels. Really, I put you guys into so much trouble.

Although this is only a fiction story, I've had so many people help me, and even let lowly "phone novel language" appear...Really sorry.

Of course, we have to thank the illustrations provided by Hiro Kanzaki-sensei. You've made good illustrations, once again.

And to editors \_\_\_\_-san and \_\_\_\_-san , you guys helped me a lot too this time. Especially the part concerning the editorial section, it really helped me a lot. And we really debated a lot during this part. Because of many reasons, I had no choice but to edit certain parts of the novel, and having to care about all sorts of matters too, it also became a point in the novel. For editing my novel non-stop even though you both were so busy at that time, I sincerely thank you both. And also thanks to you both that I did not stop half way in between the novel, and brought out the better side of this novel.

In the afterword section in book one and two, I've said that "This book, although it seems like mine, is actually the work of four people, including the illustrator." I think that concerning this point, nothing has changed at all.

In the second half of this novel I made a character appear, and half of his script was actually created by \_\_\_\_-san. However, even though because of certain reasons I didn't put in certain points, and after adding storylines to the plot, I think I can still say that, he whole-heartedly wanted to tell those teenagers who aimed to become a novelist.

Lastly, it's concerning next chapter.

In the fourth volume, there will be information regarding the turning point in this series. Compared to previous volumes, there will be way lesser situations which are serious, and it'll turn into a more lively stage. Something like the story of Kanako and Ayase during the Cosplay Fest. And also something like Manami visiting the Kyosukes.

Of course, this is only a plan, there might be changes along the way too; who knows.

But I do hope that I can get to 'apply' the 'fruits' that I gained after working so hard, to make everyone have a good laugh.

Please look forward to the next volume.

February 2009, Tsukasa Fushimi.

### References

- 1. ↑ A slang term literally meaning "evil eye" and referring to the common "people with supernatural powers" concept found in anime/manga or referring to people who like such things.
- 2. ↑ A slang term originating from "Middle School Year 2" that (often with "byou" meaning "sickness" added on) derogatorily refers to being immature o liking immature things.
- 4. ↑ The name of a 2ch ASCII art character that speaks in the same type of archaic Japanese Saori used and Kyousuke repeated.
- 5. ↑ Firefly in Japanese is "hotaru" and hotel is "hoteru".
- 6. ↑ "Security police." Essentially the same thing, but not limited to protecting the President.
- 7. ↑ The original setting for Dragon Quest
- 8. ↑ Reference to Sherlock Holmes, of course.
- 9. ↑ A meme-ish piece of ascii art. I believe it is this : http://f.hatena.ne.jp/images/fotolife/t/tvhumazu/20091021/20091021030658.jp
- 10. ↑ The "w"s are basically "lol."
- 11. ↑ She's chanting something and every friggin character is written in archaic Japanese
- 12. ↑ Probably reference to this: http://dic.pixiv.net/a/お兄ちゃんどいて!そいつ殺せない
- 13. ↑ Visual Novel from Key
- 14. ↑ Pixiv is an art submission site.
- 15. ↑ Term regarding a generally obsolete type of website back when websites focused less on interactive features and more just on text.

# Disclaimer

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## **Credits**

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